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THE CABINET SECRET.

BY

LEIGH SPENCER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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INTRODUCTORY.

MERESTOWN is one of those dear old English towns which, after remaining for centuries in exactly the same state, and of exactly the same proportions as those in which it was originally built, has suddenly become popular, or populative, or both, and being considerably enlarged to meet the demands of its increasing inhabitants, has consequently grown to pretty well treble its original size within the last few years. One result of which is that its component parts correspond as consistently the one to the other, as would a Clapham Villa, removed from its own legitimate sphere by the side of that very tame space of ground, called by courtesy its "Common," and tacked on to the most massive portion of Warwick Castle!

In High Street, for example, the gable-

fronted houses jut out across the straitened thoroughfare. The upper halves, projecting a long way beyond the lower story, and leaning forward towards their opposite neighbours, leave but scant space for the free air and sunshine of Heaven to look down upon the pavement below, while they must be having, one fancies, an earnest gossip together on some deeply interesting and decidedly private topic, so closely do they approach their faces the one to the other. Here and there are little balconies with twisted balustrades, or an overhanging old-fashioned wooden canopy, which throws a peculiar light, or rather shade, on every article displayed in the antique window of the shop below, while to all are long casements with wide mullions and small diamond panes. Very picturesque to the eyes gazing from without, though maybe somewhat dark and sombre for the dwellers within and their every-day occupations—but—their every-day occupations?

Do they—can they—the inhabitants of those quaint, massive, old-world-houses have precisely the same wants, cares, desires, and

daily occupations as have the good folks living in Newman's Buildings or Fletcher's Row? —both a succession of exact, prim, square, upright, old maidish-looking houses; every-one with exactly the same number of sash windows, of exactly the same size, possessing each exactly so many panes fitted precisely into the same places, and at the same distances from each other, with bran-new doors in the centre of each house, with terrific-looking lion-headed knockers; all appearing to be made—as doubtless they were—by line and rule, so as to economize the greatest possible amount of bricks and mortar into the smallest imaginable space; and as though no single thing but absolute and total destruction could by any means shake them one quarter of an inch out of their highly proper and precise angles, or incline any one of them a hair's-breadth from their very pert-looking, painful perpendicular.

I had been contrasting the small heart of the town with its big suburbs in my mind somewhat in this fashion; and being of rather an imaginative turn, had mused myself into the

absolute conviction that there *must* necessarily be a great deal more of romance and interest in the life histories, far more attraction about the characters of the people who saw, or rather did not see, the sun rise through those narrow-paned windows in High Street, than could be the case with their fellow-mortals, who opened their eyes every day, in the square chambers of Newman's Buildings, on the daylight shining through the common sash windows stuck into their straight faces, when I arrived at the old friend's house I was about to visit; and the necessity of finding out how to open the catch lock of the little wicket in the shrubbery, brought my day-dream to an abrupt conclusion.

My thoughts came back to the present moment and the objects around somewhat unwillingly. They had strayed far away, and been most happily intent on building up a little romance, the heroes and heroines of which had their abode in a certain ultra-projecting and particularly unperpendicular house, my peculiar pet in my favourite street.

My old friend and I talked awhile on the

topics of the day, and then I told him—he being of the very few to whom one does tell such things—of the fancy which had occupied my thoughts upon the road. He laughed and shook his head.

"Ah! Yes, at the old-young trick again. I can well believe such a foolish fancy, and many more passing through that imaginative brain of yours. Many a time have they set mine wandering and speculating when my hair had more brown and less white than now. I remember perfectly one instance when I used to visit at two or three houses as a little boy with my mother, in which, while she was talking to the grave, and to me very tiresome inhabitants, I would take many a mental inventory of the matter-of-fact chairs, tables, and stools in those cold bare rooms, where not a single trifling item which was not absolutely necessary for use seemed admitted, what was there being of the plainest, least attractive kind. I used to connect the furniture with its owners, and speculate on the sort of existence they must lead—the possible interests and excitements that could have birth in those

cold, prim, ugly rooms; and it was with a shudder of self-gratulation that I got out of them, and felt thankful I did not live there."

He paused a second. I gave him a sympathizing glance, little expecting the next words, and he resumed—

"But, Fred, I have grown wiser since then—years have taught me, as they will you, that life has much interest, much usefulness, nay, much true enjoyment, and some romance, too, in those dwellings, the despised of my childhood. Yes! human nature and human history is pretty much the same, whether its story be played out in the most antiquated building of old, whose foundations were laid centuries ago—or in the modern villa erected but yesterday."

Again my friend paused, and looked at me. I suppose my expression was somewhat sceptical, for he continued with a smile—

"To convince you of it, come to me to-morrow evening early, and I will read you a true tale concerning some people who once dwelt in this very town. It was a story that happened when I was younger than I am now,

and when Newman's Buildings, the oldest part of our *new* town, were but just built. The particulars interested me, and I wrote them down, combining the different incidents into a sort of tale; and I will hunt up my MSS. to-morrow, if you have any mind to hear it."

I had a very great mind, and accordingly on the next evening I again found myself in my old friend's study, where, established each of us in a most comfortable easy-chair, he read, and I listened to, the following narrative:—

CHAPTER I.

IT was one of the sultriest of August's most sultry evenings. Every brick and tile in the High Street of Merestown seemed still reflecting back, and glowing with, the intense heat which the broiling sun had bestowed on them all day, when Hester and Sarah Lockstone left the sofas on which they had been lounging through the whole of it, by the open window of a back room in its principal and central house, and came down to the ordinary family sitting-room fronting the street.

The casement was partly opened, but only sufficiently so, apparently, to admit a large proportion of heat and dust, without in any measure cooling the oppressive atmosphere of the large and, at this hour, gloomy-looking chamber. The heavy table had been cleared for tea, but no tea was there—only a coating

of dust from the road, but little thinner than that which covered the sideboard and chairs. Everything looked particularly bare and uncomfortable, and so the sisters seemed to think. Hester, uttering an expression of disgust, turned away, and seated herself in the farther corner of the room; while Sarah, advancing to the window, threw it as widely open as the old-fashioned divisions would permit.

"What can you be doing that for?" exclaimed the elder sister in an aggrieved tone; "have we not dust enough already in the room, that you are letting in a little more?"

"Nonsense! My opening the window will help to drive out what is here already. Don't you see the wind is changed? Besides, that precious old water-cart has been down, and pretended to water the street at last. Ugh! what an atmosphere! Where is old Rachel and the tea, I wonder? That woman gets more intolerable every day. I would not have left that passably cool room, I am sure, if I had not believed everything was ready here; there is no need to be baked sooner than is absolutely necessary. How absurd it is of

my father, too, keeping us stewing on in this house."

"Yes, there I agree with you," returned Hester, laying her feet up on the next chair as she spoke; "but it is all my mother's fault —if she would make more stir in the matter we might get away. It will kill me if we have to live on here much longer—but now; pray do move out of the way, Sarah, and let me feel a little fresh air, if there is any."

Sarah shrugged her shoulders and smiled scornfully, as, without the least altering her position in compliance with the peevishly uttered request closing her sister's sentence, she answered the commencement of it.

"Yes, that is a fine speech for you to make, truly—you, who give yourself so much trouble in every way, and exert yourself so exceedingly, and who, above all, show so much spirit in resisting and opposing my father's whims. Pah! you and my mother are just alike, and about equally useful as regards that matter; though, to be sure," she added, as her lip curled with an expression of many mingled emotions, among which sarcasm and

anger had chief places, though shame and sorrow were there too, though in somewhat distorted guise—"to be sure he would attend very much, doubtless to either her wishes or yours on this or any other point, express them as strongly as you might!"

There was a pause; Hester had closed her eyes, and was leaning back in her chair with an air of patient suffering, that might have been interesting, was, possibly, to those who, unlike her sister, did not know that there was no shadow of reason existing why Hester Lockstone should not be as active and cheerful as any other damsel of four-and-twenty, possessed of a particularly well-formed body and healthy constitution.

Sarah continued leaning against the window-frame, her head resting on her hands, her lips still parted with their pecular smile, and her busy eyes roving up and down the street, taking in all—a very little all it was, especially at that hour of the day—that was going on there, while her thoughts were hard at work upon matters very foreign to those which met her eye. Presently, however, her

countenance changed; she leaned a little forward, and then, as her smile became wholly satirical, said—

"Here comes Frank Marsden, Hester, so I suppose you will open your eyes, and manage to command so much exertion as to sit upright and look just half alive at least—not but that from his look I am not sure but you would suit his present mood best as you are; he walks as statelily as if he were going to a military funeral, and his face is solemn enough to befit such an occasion. Upon my word, I don't envy you your conversation to-night, Hester. You will be an interesting couple to whisper soft sayings to each other, truly!"

She laughed somewhat bitterly as she concluded, and the next instant the door opened and the young man she had spoken of entered the room. He was rather handsome, though perhaps the chief charm of his face was its peculiarly honest, sincere expression. His years might number some four or five-and-twenty. As he came in he glanced uneasily first at Hester, then at Sarah. Something was

evidently disturbing his generally equable and happy temperament. However, he shook hands in his usual fashion, observed on the extreme heat of the day, looking again at the elder sister as he did so; then, sitting down by her side, he remained quite silent, appearing lost in a reverie of not the pleasantest nature in the world.

Hester glanced at him once or twice with a half-displeased, half-injured air; while Sarah watched first one and then the other with an amused expression and the old disagreeable smile—for disagreeable it certainly was, as much so as a very handsome girl's smile can be.

Suddenly Frank roused himself as some noise in the house, hinting at Rachel's possible approach with the long-delayed tea, startled him; and, turning to Hester, he said, so hastily that it absolutely made her forget her inert self so far as to start up—

"Hester, is this really true—has your father pressed on his claim so closely that the Lees are to be turned out of their beautiful old home, without any choice being left

them of retrieving their prospects through that fine lad's exertions?"

The person addressed looked up with some surprise, but with quite recovered composure. Sarah's face flushed crimson for a moment, then resumed the old smile and expression, with perhaps a shade more of scorn added to it.

"Wait!—I'm sure I think papa has waited quite sufficiently long already. Why, do you not know he has resolved to keep us all stewed up here till we can move at once to Lee Manor? Surely you cannot have much consideration for me to talk so quietly of waiting. If they have lost, and papa gained the property, I can see no reason for our not taking possession—I am sure *I* want change of scene enough," and, as if exhausted by so unusually long and energetic a speech, Hester sighed heavily, and once more leant back in her seat.

Frank had looked impatient, almost angry, while she was speaking, and now, getting up, with an irritated air, said, as he walked up and down the room:

"I hope—I think you do not know the circumstances of the case, Hester. No. You could not speak so if you did—or I may have been misinformed myself, but, I am afraid, my authority was too good. I heard a little about the matter when I was here before, but then I treated it very lightly, thinking either it was altogether a mistake, or that it would end very differently from what it now promises to do."

Frank paused a moment; then, receiving no response from either girl, went on:

"Your father, as Mr. Lee's man of business, had a large mortgage on the estate himself, it seems, and has gradually been buying up most of the others; and now, just lately, if my information is correct, he has taken advantage of their present extreme distress and Edward Lee's absence, to enforce his claims, and obtain possession of the whole property, buying up the other mortgages for a mere trifle; and this while there is great doubt if some of the debts with which the estate is encumbered can be proved to exist at all, much less their payment

be legally enforced under the circumstances. Besides which, this is done just as the son, a youth of great promise, has nobly launched himself on the world, with the avowed purpose of straining every nerve to retrieve the affairs of his family. And he will do it, too, if anyone can; his abilities are first-rate, and his energy untiring, with principles of the highest order; give him but reasonable time—a few years even—which mercy, nay, justice itself demands in this case, I should say."

Frank had begun slowly, but he proceeded rapidly, and with great excitement, as he brought his harangue to an end, while his face flushed, and his eyes sparkled, in the earnestness of the feelings the thoughts to which he gave utterance had aroused within him. Hester looked up in his face with a quiet astonishment at his energy, and seemed perfectly unable to answer. Sarah, however, turned round with a freezing air, and said, in a cold, dry voice—

"Upon my word, Mr. Marsden, you are very obliging to point out so kindly the right

course for my father to pursue in regard to his own affairs. Of course, as you have lived so many more years in the world than himself, you are more capable of judging what is the fittest course in this matter; but allow me to say that I, for one, do not carry my benevolence to quite so Utopian a height as you appear to do. I should not at all feel inclined to follow your plan of risking all the profits of a life-long industry on the very doubtful chance of a young man's being ultimately successful in life, and—a still more problematical possibility—of his possessing enough generosity, or *principle*, as you say, finally to restore one's own property, but so many years after it was due, that it might perhaps arrive time enough to add dignity to one's funeral honours—not in any way to further one's enjoyments in life.

Frank bit his lip, and glanced at the speaker almost contemptuously, but he made no answer, and as the instant after Rachael appeared at the door, tea-tray in hand, no more passed at that time upon the subject.

CHAPTER II.

ON that very same sultry August evening, another scene in the drama of human life was being enacted in another part of Merestown.

This scene was laid in a newly-built little house, one of the row of Newman's Buildings, in fact. It was redolent of paint and putty, and the strong evening sun, which glared fully and fiercely in at its west-fronted, narrow sash windows, aided not a little to extract the scent of both those charming accompaniments to freshly erected dwelling-places. The little narrow slip of ground in front, called by courtesy a garden, was bare of all things approaching to flowers, and the patchy turf was brown with exposure to heat and dust; the green railings glared painfully in rivalry with the bright red brick of the house, and

any one looking on the whole would have scarcely felt surprised that its sole inmate should at that moment be suffering from one of the acutest of headaches.

She was a fair, delicate girl, looking barely fifteen, though really almost three years older. And there she stood, within the tiny parlour of that oven-like house, in the middle of the room, pressing her hand upon her burning, throbbing brow, but only for a moment. She could afford no longer time to rest, though miserably weary and fearfully hot, for her long day's dreary work was not yet over—those two boxes of books had still to be put in the neat little shelves prepared for them. They were now—partly unpacked—strewn about in confusion, some on the floor, some still within their cases, and they *must* be stowed away immediately; there was no space for the admission of untidiness or disorder in these confined precincts. Besides, few in comparison as were those precious volumes, they were books still, their own, and would perhaps help to lend some slight appearance of *home* to the strange, chilling aspect of this

little square room; so they must be neatly ranged in order, and the boxes carried away, and then all would be ready for them.

Ready! She glanced round the bare, uncomfortable looking room as the thought passed through her mind. Yes, ready—as fit as such a room, with what narrow means were now in her power, could ever be made for those whom she was now instantly expecting.

A sharp pang shot through her heart. Alas! alas! what a place for *them* to come to—being what they were, leaving what they did—and the vision of a lovely home scene rose vividly before her, just as she had herself seen it a thousand times over in happy bygone years—such as her fancy, all unbidden, instantly suggested to her, she might have seen it now.

A long low house, the middle part higher, and bearing witness in its general aspect to a remoter date of architecture than the two sides, which plainly spoke of the Elizabethan taste and era. A heavy, old-fashioned arched doorway, the door of solid oak, richly carved,

standing partly open and displaying to view a grand and lofty hall, ornamented richly in every part not only with noble statues, the production of the choicest Italian art, but with the picturesque if more homely evidences of English prowess in wood and field and stream, nay, on the very battle-ground itself; for on one side were suspended not only two or three grim old helmets, but a line of swords, varying in shape and form from the awkward weapon of some seven centuries before to the lighter but still ponderous broad-sword of the seventeenth century. They were a gallant race the owners of that old mansion, and had never failed to send a soldier forth from their roof-tree to fight for king and country whenever either had been in peril.

But it was not of swords or battle-fields or warriors that this young maiden dreamt just now—nay, not even of that glorious hall itself, dear as its every part, its every ornament, was to her heart; but of a more domestic genial picture.

Those three French windows, somewhat to

the left of the great hall, are wide open, too, and through them you can see in the distance a massive sideboard, with a weight of quaint old family plate resting upon it, and nearer the polished dining-table, with its glittering surface reflecting back on all sides the rich fruits, cool wines, and lovely flowers with which it is abundantly laden; but nearer still are the objects on which the eye naturally rests—animate objects, with human faces that just now are bearing testimony to the enjoyment of much quiet human pleasure.

Quite close to the far-off window is drawn up a capacious easy-chair, and in it sits a white-haired *gentleman.* Lay somewhat more than ordinary stress on that last word, and there you have his portrait; for gentleman, old, somewhat infirm, perhaps a little weak and uncertain in his spirit now, but still gentleman is what the present owner of this fair domain looks in an unmistakable and intense degree; and he looks but what he is. Standing opposite, a little way removed, so that she may not intercept his view, but still near enough to catch and answer his every

look and gesture with sympathising word and smile, is a fair comely dame of middle age, so fair and comely in her ripe autumn of matronhood, that had you been the deciding Paris of a second contest for superior beauty, you might have been tempted to award the coveted apple to her rather than to the slender girl who, just outside the window, is now bending her young, blushing, laughing face down towards her father, as she points out to him the merry gambles of the two other individuals who complete the grouping of that happy family picture.

These two are farther off, upon the smooth lawn which bounds the broad gravel sweep just in front of the house. A noble, beautiful boy, just on the verge of manhood, gambolling, with the exuberant glee of his free young spirits, with an enormous Newfoundland dog, who now lies quietly down, in all the secure dignity of his size and strength, watching his playfellow's cautious advance as he hopes to spring on him at unawares, now just slipping from beneath his young master's hand as it all but secures and seizes him, and

starting off across the lawn, over into the park, through and round about the trees, then back again, and close up now to the maiden, now to the youth, at a speed which forbids all thought of pursuit.

And the frame-work of this picture is as fair and pleasing as anything else about it. Immediately in front the sweeping carriage drive, then the velvet lawn shading down in the distance into the park itself, with all its magnificent wealth of noble old trees, clothed in all the richness of their summer foliage; at the side, some fine old cedars and evergreens, with one huge lime tree spreading its full sweeping boughs down—down from the summit in ever widening circles, till they rest upon the turf below, hiding the green carpet from every eye, and all else besides, except in one place, where a passing glance can be caught of a glittering flower-bed of red geraniums, and other bright things, giving some slight promise of the floral treasures one step beyond that spreading tree would disclose to you; and all this lighted up by the glorious splendour of a summer evening, when

the bright sun, in the passing sadness of his lingering farewell, casts such long cool shadows over trees, grass, and flowers, that you forget, in their enjoyment, the oppressive ardour of his noontide heat, and are tempted yet to wish his longer abiding with you.

Such is the bright vision which rises up all too visibly in the truth and earnestness of its colouring before that busy worker at No. 5, Newman's Buildings!

No. 5, Newman's Buildings! Ah, what a contrast! That very address of the new dwelling-place conveys its utter dissimilarity with the former one. This square room, with its four equally sized walls, its one formal window just in the middle of one, the vulgar little grate in another, the door in the third! Ah! not all her many ingenious efforts, not even the two little bookshelves dividing the fourth wall between them, though now nicely fitted with her precious treasures, the few old friends she could justly bring hither, can change the character of that room, or make it look much other than what it is—the ugly little parlour and sole sitting-room

of a house in a second-rate suburban row.

So at least thinks poor Mabel Lee, as with weary body, and still more weary mind, she takes another look at the result of her day's work, when she returns from dragging the book-boxes out of sight along the narrow little passage, as near the top of the kitchen stairs as her unaided strength can convey them.

Poor Mabel Lee! You are yourself at this moment almost as great a contrast to that other self of some months back, looking so joyously in at the dining-room windows of Lee Manor as is this common nutshell of a place to the stately home of your forefathers!

Yet you do yourself injustice, Mabel, and your careful handiwork, too. Other eyes than yours, especially those less accustomed than your own to every elegance and beauty with which art and nature can adorn a dwelling, would discern many tokens in this square room, bare and ugly as it seems to you, that it is not utterly deserted by the spirit of taste and beauty, that a hand has worked therein

not altogether identical with such hands as might be supposed ordinarily familiar with such spheres of labour as this; in short, that the parlour of No. 5 did somehow differ interiorly from Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4, alike as they might appear on a first glance.

That old worked ottoman with twisted legs has evidently displayed its comfortable length to other loungers than those of the present century, and yet was never contaminated by the unhealthy atmosphere of Wardour Street. This little table is of a finer and more delicate make than any you could meet with in any other house in this row, or in most others. That China jar speaks of other acquaintanceship than that of ordinary flaunting porcelain. The old picture opposite the window tells its own tale of a generation passed away; and most simple yet most striking evidence of all, that bright bouquet of precious flowers in its richly cut glass speaks of a presiding spirit of greater taste, refinement, and elegance than one would suppose ordinarily falls to the lot of such an abode as No. 5, Newman's Buildings.

Cherished Penates of a happier time, a nobler home, surely ye or your ghosts are still hovering round the hearth of this exiled household!

But poor Mabel saw them not—felt them not, and, weary and disheartened, she gave her final glance round that ungenial room. Very desponding was the sigh she gave as she advanced towards the one window to try if, broiling as was the outer air, it might not somewhat improve the atmosphere within.

She threw the sash wide open, but the glare and heat became yet more acutely sensible; and, despairingly, she leant forward to see if not one summer breeze of evening, however faint, would steal over from the far-off country lanes to bless these dreary city homes.

No! not one! They were all too busy flirting with the red poppies and yellow cisti in the bright corn-fields, or bestowing their fond caresses on the woods and streams, to have one stray breath to give to such unattractive bare resorts as these.

Thus, at least, it seemed to Mabel, who thought

that she and summer joys had said farewell for ever!

She drew her head in once more, and then gathered the light muslin curtains close about the window. Perhaps they would give the desired shade without adding greatly to the gloom which, to her tired fancy, seemed already to pervade the room, in spite of the unsoftened glare thrown fully into it.

All the preparations within her power at last completed, Mabel sat down upon the old ottoman to rest; but she soon found to do so was impossible. If she allowed physical fatigue to overcome her, all mental strength would vanish. She must give way at last, and that would never do—a tear-stained face was not the one with which she must strive to meet her parents on the threshold of their new home.

So she got up once more, and occupied herself with wandering from room to room throughout the house—not an over-long journey—putting additional touches of some sort to the arrangements of each, little as they seemed needed, and continuing her sad monotonous pilgrimage till the sound of approaching

wheels struck on her strained senses. She knew it.

They were coming!

CHAPTER III.

HEAVILY on came the one-horse fly of Merestown, and very dilapidated and shabby it looked as it drew up before the narrow wicket-gate of No. 5, Newman's Buildings. How widely different was the graceful prancing curve with which their beautiful bays had been wont to land their carriage at the portal of Lee Manor!

But Mabel resolutely forbore to dwell on this just then, though the passing comparison *would* glance through her mind. She hastened forward, tying her garden-hat close down over her brows, so as partially to shade her pale, tired face, greeted her mother with a smile which was very sweet, though like the sad gleam of dying day, and then held her arm to help her feeble father in alighting from this novel vehicle.

Mr. Lee had become very weak in mind of late, almost childish indeed, though his fond wife and loving daughter were fain to try and hide the fact as far as they could, both from themselves and from each other.

"Where have you been, Mabel?" he asked querulously, as he descended from the fly, and stood leaning heavily on her young arm at the gate; "why do you stay away from me all day, so? I wanted you."

"I have been busy, you know, dearest father, getting ready for you; come and see all I have done.

And she looked persuasively up in his face.

He made one step in advance, then paused, and turning, said fretfully,

"Where is my cabinet? You always want to take me away from that now, and you know I must have it." Muttering to himself, "Keep it safe—yes, quite safe—I must."

"There it is, papa. Deborah is helping the man to bring it in—see. Will you not come?" she added pleadingly, for she had suddenly become painfully conscious of the many curious

pairs of eyes peering out on them from every window, door, and garden that could command a view of *the new neighbours*; and the sensitive nature of the poor girl who had hitherto breathed no other social atmosphere than that of the high-bred refinement of secluded aristocratic county life, and rarely of that, shrunk in its young experience from this first ordeal in association with a lower sphere.

"Dear papa, please come, mamma is waiting for us," she again urged, as the old man still obstinately stood by the gate, holding her fast while he watched the conveyance into the house of the treasured object of his care.

This was a very old and exceedingly curious cabinet, of very peculiar and elaborate foreign workmanship. Its size was rather less than that of an ordinary cheffonier, but it consisted of an innumerable number of little drawers and crevices, which, when they were opened, gave it the air of a well peopled dovecote; when shut, the compartments were so artfully hidden, that the very handles themselves ap-

peared only a necessary part of the carved design on its exterior.

This cabinet had always stood in the drawing-room at Lee Manor, and as a rule was never used by the master of the house, though the ladies occasionally put some of their work or other trifles within its hiding-places. It had been a matter of great surprise to both of them, therefore, when Mr. Lee, just about the time that his mind had given unmistakeable symptoms of impending feebleness of intellect, to say the least, had simultaneously manifested an all-absorbing interest in his cabinet, and an unceasing watchfulness over it. Indeed, so irritable and anxious did he shew himself whenever it was long out of his sight, that they had at last resolved to redeem this alone from among all those not absolutely necessary articles which had been handed over with the house to its new owner. It was at a cost entailing some privations on them that this was done; but a greater sacrifice would have been cheerfully made by either loving woman to gratify even a lighter whim of the afflicted old man.

So the cabinet had been redeemed and placed in the fly with Mr. and Mrs. Lee, very fortunately, as it turned out, for it was soon evident no earthly power could have induced the former to leave the old Manor House without the exercise of personal compulsion, so long as that old cabinet remained within its walls.

By this time it was resting just at the threshold of the narrow passage in the new little house, and Mr. Lee, seeing it there, consented to advance thither himself; but no entreaty or persuasion of his daughter's could get him farther thant he door till he saw his treasure safely stowed away within.

So Mabel, resigning her place by his side to her mother, went in herself, and, with Deborah's aid, stowed the cabinet away in an empty space she had left for it between the bookshelves, and then Mr. Lee and his wife came with their fair daughter into the new home.

Mrs. Lee sat quietly down in a corner of the room, shading her face with her hand.

She felt instinctively all that had passed—was passing in her child's mind, and she would not look up till she had so far mastered the agitation within, which she could *not* quite subdue, as to present at least a calm and placid, if not a contented and happy face, to that anxious watcher.

The old man, only partially conscious of the change, so far as those about him could judge, and not at all so of its causes, was for the first few moments entirely absorbed in examining the object of his great solicitude. He walked round it, felt over its surface with his hands, opened first one drawer, then another, and finally, patting it complacently, sat down in his easy chair, which Mabel had pushed near, murmuring in satisfied accents,

"All safe—all safe!"

Mabel drew a stool near, and sat down at his knee, softly caressing the withered hand resting on it, which presently began to play with her hair, as if in acknowledgment, smoothing it fondly, or sometimes twisting his fingers in the silky tresses escaped from

their imprisonment during her day's work, and now falling loosely about her shoulders. There was silence for awhile, but, by-and-by, the old man grew weary of the quietness, and began to look restlessly round.

"Mabel," he said, querulously, "what have you brought me here for? I don't like it, my child. This room is small—very small—and it is, oh! so hot!"

"It is a hot day, dear papa; but the sun is nearly gone. Now I will open the curtains, then it will be cooler—and see, here are some of your own favourite flowers."

And, hastily drawing the curtains wide, she brought him the vase of flowers, to turn his attention, if possible, to them.

"Yes, they are very nice, my darling—like my little Mabel herself; but Fergusson should put some outside too—I must tell him. Where is Dawson?—ah! I forgot," and with a look of mingled recollection and helplessness, inexpressibly painful to behold, he put his hand to his head, and sank back again into the chair from which he had risen. Mabel looked despairingly at her mother, who

had caught that beseeching, agonized look, and now stood by her husband's side.

"My darling," she whispered, soothingly folding her arm round her daughter, "it is what we must expect. Do not fear, my love; he has borne it wonderfully considering. Remember what Dr. Armsdaile said—'There, he is better now.'"

Even as she spoke, the old man looked up once more, with the same vacuous expression of incapacity for reasoning, and smiled contentedly as a tardy breeze did at length find its way in at the window, and played for an instant with his thin grey hair, after bringing him the sweet odour of the bouquet it had kissed in its progress. How Mabel blessed that breeze!

"Mabel, they are very sweet—I like them," he murmured, as he looked round to where she stood with clasped hands, and an inaudible thanksgiving on her lips—"very sweet; and it is safe—quite safe," he added, glancing once again towards the cabinet———"that's right—that's well."

"Yes, papa, we are all safe and well,"

Mabel answered, making a violent effort to master her emotion, and speak in her usual clear and cheerful tones, which ordinarily had so good an effect on him; "and Deborah is here too, you know, and mamma, and Dr. Armsdaile will be coming soon."

"Dr. Armsdaile!—ah! yes; that is well —that is right," and a placid smile stole over the worn face—"he is a good man, Dr. Armsdaile."

The words had hardly passed his lips when a doctor's carriage stopped at the gate, and the gentleman they had been speaking of entered the room. He gave one quick glance at his old friend and patient, and another at his wife; then his eyes met the wistful ones which were watching his own face so eagerly, and he smiled. After that smile Mabel scarcely needed the "All is well—better than I expected," which he whispered as she greeted him hurriedly in passing from the room. How thankful she was! and not the least subject for gratitude at that moment was the doctor's own arrival, which released her for a short time from close attendance on her

father; for sorely did she need some respite from forced cheerfulness and constrained composure, after that day of overtaxed strength, both of mind and body.

She sought her own tiny bed-chamber at the top of the house, and there leaning from the little window in the roof, which commanded something approaching to a country prospect, she bowed her head upon her hands, and gave way to the torrent of pent-up emotion within.

Not long, however, was she left to indulge the luxury of abandonment. Scarcely ten minutes, hardly one, it appeared to her, had passed away, when she heard a well-known voice calling on her in low but plaintive accents.

"Miss Mabel, Miss Mabel, darling, can you come a minute?"

"Yes, Deborah, directly."

And Mabel hastily bathed her head and face in cold water, smoothed her disordered hair, and betook herself to the kitchen, a very small cavern-like place it looked to the unaccustomed eyes now surveying it in its

underground dimness; but, after all, it was cooler than the parlour, and something like an evening sky glow had penetrated into it from the open door of the scullery, which abutted on the little slip of a back-garden.

"Well, Deborah, how are you getting on?" Mabel asked with a smile she struggled hard, and with partial success, to make cheering.

Deborah glanced at the darling of her heart, her own special charge as she had been from the first month of her fair young life, and tried to return that smile with interest, but it would not do. She felt the corners of her mouth twitching, and her eyes growing moister as she looked at the pale face, once so bright and joyous; so she turned hastily to the fire, and while vigorously poking it, answered,

"Bravely, my pet—bravely! Only, you see, I was not quite sure how the things went up for tea, and I thought you'd show me, sweet. It wouldn't do for *him* to notice any difference —this night, above all."

Mabel sighed, and thanked her fond old nurse for her thoughtful care.

"You are quite right, my good Deborah, it would not. My father would notice it directly, even though Dr. Armsdaile is here; but you have the things very nearly the same as usual, if not quite," she added, making some trifling alteration in the arrangement of the tea-tray as she spoke.

"Well, Miss, I thought I knew pretty near; I wanted to put them all myself last night, to be right certain; but Mr. Ashton—he didn't like to let me—he must do it as usual he said the very last night, and he looked so sad and pitiful, Miss, as he said it, and showed me how he put everything, master's cup, especially, I couldn't gainsay him nohow."

"Poor Ashton!" murmured Mabel, brushing the tears again starting from her own eyes, "did he go before you left, Deborah? —and Stevens, is she gone?"

"They are all gone by this, you may be sure, my darling, every mother's child of them. Do you think they'd stay to see another master than a Lee in the old Manor? No—not they—not one of them, I'm certain, but

they would stay to see the very last of master and the mistress."

"Oh! Deborah!" was Mabel's half-frightened, half-expostulatory ejaculation.

"I couldn't help it, pet, they would—they must, they all said; but they'd be very good, and so they were, Miss, not a tear fell from any one of them, till master was safe into the fly, and had passed through them all."

"You do not mean they all assembled to see you leave?—Deborah, how could you let them?"

"I couldn't help it, dear, indeed, and you see it did no harm. They all drew up in the hall, as they used to do when we had a wedding or a christening party coming home, and master and mistress walked down the whole line of them. But don't look so feared, my pet, you see it did no harm. It pleased *him*, I think, for he nodded and smiled quite happy all the way down, when he noticed them at all, but that wasn't often, he was so unaccountable taken up with that cabinet thing, and having it took out before him."

"Did he ask for it when you started, then?"

"Before! bless you, darling, the moment he saw the fly, and knew he was going—'*Coming to you!*' as poor mistress told him—he took hold of that cabinet, and never rested till Thomas and John came and carried it out before him. He wouldn't stir out of the room till that old thing had gone first."

"How lucky we decided on keeping it; but what a strange fancy it is—poor papa!" said Mabel, musingly; and then she slowly wended her way back to the sitting-room, that she might be ready to make the tea, now her father's favourité meal, when Deborah should bring it.

Deborah, their one great treasure now, "Old Nurse!" "Mrs. Dawson!" "Na-nah!" by all of which fond aliases she was wont to be called in the happy days of that household of which she had been for years a respected member. But very old she really was not, happily for the Lees in their present circumstances, as she was the one amongst their many old servants who vowed she would never leave them, come what might, and who was, besides, best fitted to fulfil the many and

various duties which must now all fall to the lot of their one domestic.

She was quite a young woman when she became Miss Mabel's nurse, and had quickly transferred to her charge all the fond love of her heart which had not been buried in the grave of her husband and only child; but as Mabel and her brother grew up, their nurse seemed, to their young experiences, quite an aged personage, and she was perfectly content to be so considered, as, in virtue of that antiquity, she possessed the authority and influence which might have been lost had they realized the fact that she was not much past middle age.

So Deborah had grown into a privileged person, a humble friend, one of the old and faithful family retainers, such as are now fast becoming extinct, it is to be feared, in these our later days; and great was the comfort and solace her cheerful presence and active bodily service brought to the Lees in the first sad days of their adversity.

CHAPTER IV.

"FATHER, does a man generally strive very eagerly for that which he does not care for when gained?" asked Sarah Lockstone, breaking the stillness which had reigned for the last hour among the family party, so suddenly that each of them was startled from his or her respective occupations, all of which were of a passive character.

Her mother, half roused from a tranquil dose, gazed sleepily round; Hester languidly turned her half-closed eyes reproachfully on the speaker, awakening from her usual lazy muse; and Mr. Lockstone himself gave a visible start in his great leathern chair, as he raised his head from the drooping position in which he had sunk, while apparently intent on speculations respecting the fireless grate, so fixedly had his sharp sunken eyes been regarding it.

"No, certainly not," he answered at last, looking somewhat uneasily at his younger daughter.

"Nor do they risk a life's labour, fortune, health, on a venture which, if attained, they would leave untouched?" she continued asking, as if simply seeking information; while her father's restless eyes betrayed his mistrust of the singleness of her intent in these queries. "And what would you call a man who, after staking all these, and perhaps more too, should win the prize, but shrink from taking possession of it?" and she raised her large dark eyes to her father's face.

"A fool, girl!" he answered, impatiently; "a fool, of course!"

"And so should I; and a coward also," she returned composedly, in slow and distinct tones; "but I should hardly have judged, from your actions, that you agreed with me, father."

Again she fixed her expressive but cold eyes upon his face inquiringly.

He gave no audible reply, only moving un-

the passive Hester attended little to the meaning of the words, but disliked the grating tone in which such ugly expletives are sure to be uttered. Sarah alone sat unmoved, alike regardless of her father's anger, her mother's shrinking terror, Hester's offended love of quiet, and the fearful words themselves.

Indeed, she scarcely heard them. They had become matters of course with her—a natural consequence of any discussion with her father, and were passed over unheeded; the *sense* of his answer was all she attended to, and that did not seem to please her. She knitted her dark brows, and twined her long white fingers nervously together; and presently, without vouchsafing a word to her remaining companions, she, too, rose and left the room.

The thoughts passing silently through her brain were these: "Cannot understand them! I can, and better than you yourself, faint-hearted *man*, as you plume yourself on being! Pho! I have not patience with such weak dallying; some preliminaries may be neces-

sary—must be—but till Christmas—four months—I *will* know what these reasons are, and see if there be any sense in them."

And so she followed her father to his business-room—his office, where she alone had ever dared to penetrate; ruthlessly extracted such explanations as she required from the unwilling betrayer of his own counsels; and then returned to her mother and sister, to whom at length she deigned to impart some of her own knowledge, and the conclusions she deduced from it.

"Hester, you must be contented to startle High Street with your active winter movements once again, and defer till next spring the wanderings with Frank Marsden in Lee Manor alleys. We shall not be there till Christmas—after, perhaps."

"Then it is very hard, and I think you all treat me very unkindly to let my father keep me here in this way," rejoined the elder sister, so much roused as absolutely to sit upright in her chair.

Mrs. Lockstone, who saw Sarah expected

her to speak also, merely observed very meekly,

"I like the country—at least I used to like it when I was a girl—but if we must stay here still, I suppose we must."

The strange smile passed over her younger daughter's handsome face as she listened to these words, and her glance of mingled contempt and pity for the weakness of their natures, travelled from one to the other as she answered,

"There are reasons in this case why we should remain, but as to submitting to a *must*, merely because I was told it existed and no more, or, worse still, merely because my father chose to use the word, I would scorn such weakness. And, Hester, if you feel so much the most ill-used among us, I advise you to use your own free will, and tell him you *will* go to Lee Manor this very week. Why not? None but ourselves can fight our own battles best! Go and tell him you are determined not to stay here."

Hester knew it was vain to cope with her sister when once she brought forward such an

argument as this advice. She gave one reproachful glance in answer, and then, sinking back into her usual position of luxurious ease, took up a book Frank Marsden had given her the night before, and tried to seem what she was not—reading, and interested in it.

Meek Mrs. Lockstone attempted no conversation when her daughters appeared disposed to let it cease, and silence again reigned among them. Nor was it broken till, as the sisters were undressing in their own room at night, Sarah carelessly remarked,

"By-the-bye, Hester, what ails your swain this time? He is quite a changed creature from the light-hearted, devoted Frank Marsden of a year ago. I could almost believe he had learned to *reason* since I saw him last, but for his still treating you as an invalid," and she laughed a low, satirical laugh.

Hester fired up, as her sister knew she would. This was attacking her at once on two tender points, the last especially.

"I am sure I don't know what you mean,

Sarah," she answered, quite rapidly; "you never think of all I go through, I know, but you might leave me to suffer in peace; and as for Mr. Marsden, whatever he is, or is not, does not matter to *you*. I like his being quieter all the better, and I wish you would not be so extra-disagreeable to-night, when I'm not equal to it."

Sarah laughed again; she was delighted at having roused her sister so unusually, and was really amused by part of her speech.

"Extra-disagreeable, am I, Hester?—very well; I'll try to be so oftener, if I can, if it makes you something less of a log. I suppose you know my father gives Frank an interview to-morrow, private and confidential?" and she looked sharply and suddenly at her sister, to see if she did indeed know it.

No; it was evidently news to Hester—surprising news, too, and Sarah rejoiced; but it only affected her for a little while. Her nature was not deep enough, as Sarah's was, to feel certain that the interview portended something unusual; nor, perhaps, if it had

been, was her heart's affection so earnest, even as regarded Frank Marsden himself, that she could have been moved much beyond her placid absorption in self for any length of time. So Sarah watched her for a few minutes, then shrugged her shoulders, and without vouchsafing farther speech, lay down upon her pillow and disposed herself to sleep.

Mr. Lockstone had married late in life, a fair, gentle, and young woman. Her pretty face had charmed him as much as he would allow himself to be charmed by any such unprofitable trifle in a matrimonial bargain; but her dower and her years were both such as he sought in the partner of his fortune, and so he married her, sufficiently content that a fair face, over and above, accompanied these.

Mrs. Lockstone was a pleasing girl when she married—perhaps she had a true, loving woman's heart within her well-proportioned form when Stephen Lockstone took her to his home; perhaps she had the formation of a reasoning, active-souled, duty-fulfilling wife and mother hid amid the chaos of a

gentle girl's yet unmoulded character; perhaps she had her happy dream as a girl-bride of the loving but firm and clever husband who was to develop all that was good—subdue all that was evil in her young, untried nature; perhaps——

Ah! well—what matters it now what her dream was?—it visited her five-and-twenty years ago, and Hester Elton is timid, submissive Mrs. Lockstone now, afraid of her husband, afraid of her daughters, and most afraid of the times when thoughts and scenes of long ago come back to her, and she trembles at half-formed, stifled longings, and half-comprehended, restless repinings, and worse dreads of the future.

And the daughters—those two handsome girls! Alas! bitter tears has she shed over both many years ago; she never weeps now, except when a few weak drops fall helplessly from her eyes when frightened at her husband's oaths or Sarah's determined will.

She had but one boy, and he died; and her husband had set his heart upon a boy, and often had he upbraided her with bringing him

strong girls, and only one sickly lad, whom she let die. Often has he told her he married her for nothing but that she might give him a son, an heir to the wealth and position he sees his way to winning, and is resolved to have; often has he said he wishes he had never married her—that those tiresome girls had never seen the light! So often, that though he does not do it now so much, the trembling woman feels as if all natural affection were dead and crushed within her.

For Hester her father has a sort of indifferent admiration; she has the style of feminine beauty and passive submission of character he admires, and she came before his disappointment was confirmed. She was the first-born child of that strange household.

For Sarah—it would be difficult to expound the strange mingling of feelings with which she was regarded. He hated her because she was a woman. He had almost forgiven his wife for his disappointment. Destiny had thwarted them. But Sarah! He could never forgive her, for she might have been a boy, and she was only a girl!

Yet he admired her. He could not fail to do so; her qualities, those he could see and understand, were so congenial to what he most admired in a *man;* but then she was not a man! What business had she with them? To aggravate him all the more, because she might have been a son, a son so after his own heart, and yet was nothing but a daughter!—a woman! A daughter whom, moreover, he even learned to fear in time. She had many of his own qualities, much more strongly developed; others which he admired while hardly comprehending them, and withal a will more inflexible than his.

He knew not himself whether he most hated, admired, or felt in awe of that handsome, determined woman! Oh! if she had but been a boy!

And so the years wore on, even till now, with the Lockstone family.

CHAPTER V.

"WELL, young sir, and what is your business with me?" Mr. Lockstone asked, in the blandest voice he could assume, when Frank Marsden entered his room next morning. He tried to look jocose and suspicious too, but do what he would, those restless eyes of his betrayed uneasiness.

"I will try and not detain you long, sir," Frank Marsden answered, very gravely, and then he hesitated. What he wished farther to say was difficult to word, but he caught the expression in the elder man's face, and, after a moment's thought, proceeded at once. "It is better to speak openly, sir, I believe, and I will do so. The position I hold in regard to your family authorises me, I think, to say what might otherwise seem presumptuous and offensive in a younger man, and once your clerk."

He paused, and after Mr. Lockstone had made some movement of assent to what he had said, though rather ungraciously, and without speaking, he went on hurriedly—

"Reports of a very unpleasant nature are rife in this neighbourhood, sir, in regard to the concern you have had in the Lees' misfortunes. I know that in our profession we must often be unjustly aspersed for only doing what that profession requires; still in this case, there seems to be more than this in question, and I should be very glad if you, sir, will enable me to contradict these most disagreeable stories."

"Certainly, my dear young friend," returned Mr. Lockstone, blandly, though a scowl darkened on his features; "certainly, you have my full authority for stating that all the concern I have had with the Lees' reverses is strictly business-like—wholly so—very unfortunate; but it can't be mended now. You are but young, Frank," he added, with an effort after greater cordiality, "or you would not attach so much importance to such trifling slanders as these."

Frank's brow darkened. He hesitated for an instant, and then spoke boldly out—

"Pardon me, sir, I would not outstep the limits of my rights or your forbearance here, but it is absolutely necessary that I should be cognisant of the exact position of the affairs regarding Lee Manor, to be able to refute the statements I allude to with any good result. My merely stating it as received from you, would carry no weight, especially connected as I am with your family."

Mr. Lockstone paused, ere replying, to weigh all the results likely to attend on the line of conduct he might choose in this somewhat difficult dilemma. Where he wished his son-in-law expectant during that brief pause, we will not inquire. In a short time his mind was made up, and constraining his troubled face into a smile, he said,

"I understand. Here are a few papers connected with the matter. Look them over, and you will see it all in a moment. By the way, you know the proverb, 'An ill wind.' I hope to make such a provision for Hester

now as will enable you to become a Benedict as soon as you will."

Frank made no answer. Perhaps he did not hear. Mr. Lockstone augured differently, from the flush which his keen eye detected deepening on the young man's cheek as he bent over the documents handed to him; and this by no means tended to lessen the anxiety rising within him. It might be a lover's blush at anticipated happiness, certainly. But it might not. If anything else caused it, the lawyer intuitively felt it must be something unsatisfactory to him.

Frank turned over the papers long. The flush deepened, and once or twice his eyes were raised to Mr. Lockstone, and flashed mingled scorn and indignation on that gentleman, sufficiently expressive to have made the youth's sentiments known to him at once, had he seen the glance. But he did not. Though watching Frank, warily as a cat a too-lively mouse, when he seemed absorbed in his study, he hastily withdrew the gaze on his slightest movement, and appeared, in his turn, entirely taken up with the letters before him.

Presently Marsden rose and withdrew into the old-fashioned window, still holding some papers in his hand. But they were already read, at least enough of them to make him sick at heart; and he now held them only as an excuse for silence, while he pondered on his own course. For half an hour there was a deep silence; then the young man turned once more into the room, advanced directly opposite Mr. Lockstone, laid down the papers, and with a white face, but firm tone, thus addressed him:

"Mr. Lockstone, are you utterly resolved to act in the manner pointed out by these memoranda? Is there nothing that will influence you to a—a—" he was going to say "juster," but substituted "milder course? A family so identified with the neighbourhood, held in such honour in the county."

"In days past, young man, days past. They haven't gone with the times latterly, and Mr. Lee's marriage didn't suit some of his haughty neighbours. They've been isolated in a manner for years, since the old man has been breaking too. No, no, we shall

compass that with a good face, you'll see. I did not leave it out of my reckoning, I assure you."

Frank's face burned with indignation. He could scarcely command himself, as he answered sternly,

"I did not mean that. I was not thinking of it in your sense—" he paused somewhat abruptly.

He was still a very young man, and had stood much in awe of the astute lawyer when a boy clerk in his office; besides, he could not forget he was the father of his boyhood's companion and idol, his first love!

Mr. Lockstone saw his advantage, and instantly availed himself of it.

"I don't know what sense you may mean, Frank Marsden; but having offered you every information you desired, more than you had any right to expect, I think you may wait to give your counsel to one three times your age till you are asked for it."

"I did not intend giving you any counsel, Mr. Lockstone," Frank answered, his high spirit rising within him; "I see with sorrow it

would be thrown away if I did. Indeed, I need say no more—we think very differently on this business, and we each know that we do."

As he spoke, he fixed his clear eyes straight on the lawyer's face; the latter moved uneasily in his chair, and answered sullenly,

"Well, then, the sooner we quit the subject the better, I should say."

"Yes, but I have one thing more to say before it is dropped for ever between us, if you please, sir. Hester——"

"Ay," said Mr. Lockstone brightening, and thinking within himself, 'Yes, yes, all the same all the world over. Money, money, can indeed wash out a multitude of sins, even this young one's foolish, romantic notions, which I was rather afraid were a little stubborn.' "Well," he added aloud, "I bear no malice, Frank! What I said at first I am willing to stand to—Hester's marriage portion shall be ready at once, and a better one than you expect, too—even now."

Again Frank coloured deeply, and answered hastily,

"Mr. Lockstone, when your daughter was promised me you were comparatively a poor man—more equal with myself; were you then satisfied with the prospects before her as my wife?"

"Certainly, or I should not have held to the engagement all these years—perfectly—"

"I have not gone back in my profession, sir, as I believe you are aware. Of course, I cannot compete with you, but I have already a yearly competence of my own winning, which promises rapidly to increase."

"Well?" said Mr. Lockstone inquiringly, and somewhat wondering where the discourse was tending.

"I can now offer Hester a home and yearly income, which, though small, it is true, is yet enough for comfort, and more than many people begin life with. Were she portionless would you give her to me now?"

Mr. Lockstone hesitated a moment, then answered,

"Yes, but——"

Frank hastily interrupted him.

"Then, sir, will you give her to me *por-*

tionless now? I do not wish to express my feelings on the point farther—but, you understand, sir, I must have Hester as poor as she was a year ago—or—not at all."

The last words came with some effort, and Frank stood almost trembling after he had uttered them. Mr. Lockstone was so utterly surprised and taken aback he could not for some time collect his wits sufficiently to answer. At length he said, almost angrily,

"What folly is this, young man? You expect me to rob my daughter of what belongs to her, and all for your own silly scruples and romantic nonsense! You yourself would be the first to blame me for it when years have sobered you a little."

"No, sir, I should not. I know what I am asking, and I know myself well enough, I hope, to be certain that without this money I should be content and happy—with it, miserable and self-reproaching. But I do not desire to enter on this part of the subject with you again, sir; only will you let Hester decide for herself? She has never yet known the luxury which now apparently awaits her.

If she is content to forego it for my sake, and become my wife on a moderate income, will you, sir, confirm her decision—that is all I ask of you." He spoke eagerly—confidently, and his eyes brightened as he waited impatiently for the reply.

It came at last, unwillingly as it seemed, and very sullenly, but it was not negative.

"Do as you will. If Hester is as great a fool as yourself, take her and welcome. I wash my hands of the whole concern, only beware, young man," he added more quickly, as if forcing himself at last to arouse some sort of angry spirit within, "if she refuses you on these terms, do not in after-life reflect on me as having promised you my daughter in early years, and then drawn back when I became a rich man. She is there, and her fortune too, now. But once rejected, you shall have neither of them with my free will, depend on it."

"Thank you, sir, I should not ask it; but," he added after a slight hesitation, "with your permission I will speak to Hester this evening"

He seemed about to add something more, but changed his mind; and on Mr. Lockstone sullenly answering, "As you please," bid him good morning, and took leave.

Mr. Lockstone left alone was a different man from Mr. Lockstone confronting his ex-pupil and son-in-law aspirant. He had betrayed by no word or look to Frank the real uneasiness, and something more—something nearly akin to shame which this interview had caused him; but once free from that honest, straightforward youth's observation, he gave way at once, and, leaning his hands on the table and his head on them, uttered an ejaculation somewhat akin to a groan.

But Stephen Lockstone was not the man to yield long to any such weakness, even if betrayed into it for a moment by such a succession of disagreeable truths as he had of late been unwillingly forced to open his eyes to; so he soon raised his head again, shook himself, muttered an oath or two, and then said half aloud,

"Confound me for a weak fool; that boy has contaminated me, I believe, with his

young idiot fancies! If Sarah had been here what would she have said? I am glad she was not. How she would have scorned us!—me most, for not speaking out. She would have done so fearlessly, before the whole world. Ah! if she were but a man!—what she would have been!"

And then he paused, and after searching among his papers once more, looked up again impatiently, and rose from his chair, muttering—

"Pshaw!—I don't know what's come over me, but nothing seems to go right with me now. I have what I have been toiling for all my life, and now, when it's within my grasp, I dare not take it at once—my own daughter ridicules my weakness; and then this boy comes—d—— The world seems changed!" And hastily seizing his hat, Mr. Lockstone hurried out to make a distant business visit, and so divert his mind, as far as he could, from dwelling on what was highly unpleasing to him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE evening sun was gilding his brilliant chariot of mountain-like clouds with gold, and throwing sundry soft lingering lines of shaded light upon the cooling earth and waving trees, when Frank Marsden brought his betrothed bride into a pretty winding pathway, shaded by alders and hazels, some four miles out of Merestown.

The one-horse fly, opened for the occasion with considerable difficulty, and some danger to its internal economy, besides no slight display of skill on Frank's part, had brought the female portion of the Lockstone family hither after tea, with the young man as their escort. Arrived at this point, he had not had much difficulty in persuading Hester to walk into the pretty Spinney with him, while the others proceeded farther on, to visit one

of the lions of the neighbourhood—a very tame lion it was, much thought of at Merestown, but with which we have nothing to do.

Leaning on Frank's arm, certainly all the more lively for the drive, and refreshed by the cool evening breeze, Hester Lockstone, though still somewhat languid, assuredly looked very pretty, if not so surpassingly lovely as she appeared to her lover, and the young man may be forgiven if he felt his heart palpitate strangely, and his cheek pale as the time drew near when the fate he had so long believed decided was once more to be placed in the balance. Which scale would kick the beam in the hands of his fair companion?

Had anyone asked Frank if he doubted her decision, her simple-mindedness, her unselfish love for himself, he would have been extremely angry, and indignantly denied it—nay, he might even perhaps have knocked the curious questioner down, if a man, for he was young, and hot-tempered where his *love* was concerned. Why was it, then, that he

felt such a chill at his heart, such a strange, choking sensation in the throat, when he felt the time had come? Why, too, had he dallied over their walk so long, till he knew he *must* speak at once, or lose his opportunity, if there was no shadow of fear but that the maiden would return as she came, leaning on his arm, reposing on him as her natural protector? Why, if he doubted not, did he so lingeringly hold her hand in his own, and press the arm within his to his side, as if it were indeed the last time such privileged companionship and freedom would be his?

They came at last to an old gnarled beech, whose roots, twining out of and about the ground in many fantastic shapes, afforded rude but pleasant seats for tired pedestrians. Here Frank paused, and after once looking wistfully in Hester's eyes, which responded to his eager gaze with their usual quiescent glance of unmoved placid tranquillity, led her gently to one of the most convenient of the seats Nature offered them, and threw himself down close by her side.

It was very pleasant sitting there in the cool shadow of the beech leaves, as they softly rustled overhead in answer to the gentle caresses of the southern wind; to see the bright network of mingled light and shade lazily dancing at their feet; to listen to the softly-cooed notes of the ringdoves as they whispered their last fond good nights to each other; to smell the fir cones and wild thyme which made the air fragrant. Very pleasant, Hester thought it, reclining on her easy seat, with her natural and encouraged taste for the *dolce far niente*. It exactly suited her, this dreamy repose, where sight, sound, and scent, all came to offer their gratification to the senses without giving them the trouble of seeking them—hardly of receiving them. Very pleasant, Frank thought it also, and none the less that Hester's position enabled him to see to the greatest advantage her fair smooth face and perfect features—to gaze his fill on the form he loved so entirely—the case that contained, as he fondly believed, the priceless jewel of a

true woman's heart, wherein he was himself enshrined, its first and only idol.

But, pleasant or not, the spell must be broken. Time was fleeting fast, and there was the question of his life's happiness, as he believed, to be decided within the next ten minutes.

"Hester," he at last began in a voice that wavered and trembled sensibly, although the person addressed seemed unaware of it, "Hester, I have something serious to say to you—something that concerns my happiness very nearly, that is, wholly, in fact. Do you remember the day you promised to be my very own, Hester?"

He paused, and she raised her blue eyes wonderingly, as was her wont when something out of the common was said to her. They seemed to Frank unusually large and lovely at that moment. He seized her hand passionately, and went on—

"That is seven years ago, Hester—seven long years; but it is nine, ay, more since I loved you, Hester. Truly, as long as was

with Mabel, whom he found, as he expected and intended, alone.

"Well, little lady," he exclaimed, his name for her ever since she could toddle round a room alone, "so here you are in solitary grandeur, eh? 'Monarch of all you survey' in any case, child, whether that be great or small; so cheer up, little lady, I must not have you grow one whit paler or thinner, there's not a bit to spare of you, and I can't and won't change my comparative! *Least lady* does not suit my 'most musical ear' at all, though, sooth to say, it would assuredly be 'most melancholy'!"

Mabel looked up, gratefully smiling at the beginning of this address, and finally laughed outright at its conclusion. The doctor's serio-comic expression, both of face and tone, joined to his absurdly mixed quotations, was irresistible.

"I don't think I am thin, doctor, and you know I was never famous for very rosy cheeks. Edward got all my share in that way, I believe. Look at the picture he had done for mamma, in town. It ought to have come

yours when first I asked you for my wife. I cannot compete with such an establishment as your father will soon surround himself with; I can only offer you a moderate competence, joined to the tried love of the heart that has been yours for years. Choose, then, between the two."

Hester had listened with quiet placidity to the commencement of this speech, but the end appeared to trouble her. At any rate, it had the effect of rousing her dormant faculties, and it was with some amount of energy that she replied,

"But, Frank, if my father has grown so much richer, he can make me richer too, and of course he will. He doesn't want to go from his word with you, does he?" she added almost quickly.

Frank was enchanted. He believed she was thinking of *his* interests—ready to fight for *his* right—and was charmed accordingly.

"No, my own love, no. Do not fear such a thing. He is perfectly willing and eager indeed to do all he ever undertook, and more, but——"

Frank, Frank, why hesitate thus to trust this peerless idol—this second self—with your inmost and noblest thoughts? It is not because you must blame her father by implication, if not openly! You know that before this she has annoyed you a very little—as far as you would allow aught she did to annoy you—by joining passively in her sister's open abuse of some of that father's proceedings. Why, then, hesitate? Yet you do hesitate, and Hester at last utters, almost impatiently, the word,

"Well?"

"Hester, it is difficult for me to tell you all—some of my feelings as regards this accession of wealth to your father you already know—therefore perhaps you will understand—yes, I am sure you will—why it would be utterly repugnant to my feelings to accept any increased dowry with you, dearest, which came from such a source. Hester, I could not do it."

He had added the last words involuntarily, in a sort of resolute despair, as the young girl's expression had at length altered sud-

denly from its continuous look of languid quiescence to one of surprised, impatient inquiry.

"Why not? I don't understand. Do you know these Lees, then?"

"No, I have never seen one of them, poor people, to my knowledge."

"Then, why should you care about it? What concern is it of yours?"

"The concern every"—he was going to say "every honest man has in condemning injustice;" but he checked himself, and altered his sentence altogether—"In one way, I cannot help its being my concern, Hester—I am sorry to say—connected as I am with your father—but I do not wish to enter into its details with you, dear. Be satisfied to know only that your father and I are totally at variance on this matter, and that I have utterly refused to accept now, or at any future time, any moneys whatever coming to you from that source."

"Do you mean that you will not let me have my own fortune?"

"I mean, Hester, that if a larger fortune

is of greater worth in your eyes than my love, and the inferior home I only can offer you—the dream of my life is over—the——"

"Do you really mean you will not take my money?"

And Hester absolutely rose from her silvan couch, and leant on her elbow to look at him.

"Yes; at least, that I will not take more than what your father could have given you years ago. In short, Hester—doubtless it is a strange choice to lay before you, dear—but *I* have no choice except to do so—if you will not take me—comparatively poor as we both are—I—I must give you up—rather than act contrary to my conscience."

The die was cast now, and Frank Marsden who had been hesitating, timid, unlike himself, became once more the firm, strong, honest-hearted youth, waiting anxiously enough, but yet proudly, the decision of the person he loved best in the world.

"I think you are very unaccountable, Frank," was the lady's reply after a slight pause, while her pretty arched lip began to

pout, "and very—very—unkind too. Just as I am going to be comfortable, and have all the luxuries I want, you come and ask me to give them up, and all for a whim!"

"Not for a whim, dear Hester—God forbid! I would surround you with every luxury and comfort the world can offer, as you must know, my love; but here it is a case of conscience, Hester—luxury or self-approval—it is not comfort even, Hester, not you—not our mutual love—only luxury, the less or more of that bright metal which, after all, precious as it is, cannot give happiness, dear."

"I don't know what you may think of it; but *I* think it is not to be despised at all, I can tell you. I can't think what you mean. I don't understand. I thought it would all be so smooth now."

"My own Hester, you would not understand the business details even if I could tell them you, which it is much better I should not, for all our sakes; but will you not rest on my word —my assurance that there is no middle path for me, dearest—I know I should do wrong if I took the money your father offers me. I

must refuse it—yes, if I lose you with it, Hester. But must I lose you? Is wealth—are all its luxuries so very precious that they must separate those who have loved for years? Hester, it is for you to decide—I will not urge you further by word or look. Your father will give you to me comparatively dowerless, as I have asked for you, if you are willing. Hester—choose. Will you be the rich man's daughter, or the poor man's much-loved wife?"

Once more his voice trembled as he uttered the last words; but he quickly recovered himself, rose from the ground, and stood before her, proudly and steadily waiting her reply.

"I am not fit to be poor, and you know that very well. It is very cruel and unkind of you to force me to—to——"

Hester stopped in her pettishly-uttered rejoinder. Even she could not fail to see how unfounded was the charge she was bringing against her noble-minded lover. He flushed crimson as she spoke, and when

she paused, said, in a low, constrained, but very gentle voice:

"I do not force you, Hester—nay, I do not even wish to influence you. I have only put before you two courses, one of which must be followed. Let your own heart and feelings decide for your own happiness. It is all I ask."

"If you choose to give me up because I have a fortune, I cannot help it. It is not my doing. I cannot be poor—I am not fit for it,"—and Hester pouted her pretty lips again, and for once in her life looked flushed and excited.

There was even a touch of her sister's manner in her way of uttering the first sentence, though she immediately relapsed to her more usual languid tones, joined now to a dash of irritable peevishness.

Frank once more crimsoned as she spoke, then paled to a deeper white than her dress. He stood silent for an instant, then, in a voice whose depth would have betrayed to some the acuteness of the stifled emotion

within, but which Hester noticed only for its unusual hoarseness, he asked, slowly—

"This, then, is your final choice?—you will not be my wife without that money I cannot, with a clear conscience, take? Hester, is it so?"

Something, either in his voice or look, or some thought within herself—she knew not what—abashed her as the last words struck upon her ear. She, too, coloured, but it was only with increased peevishness that she replied:

"It isn't my doing—what do you put it upon me for? It is not fair. I did not want to go back from my word, but I cannot be poor. It is you who are so tiresome and silly in teazing me about your own nonsense."

"Farewell, then, Hester. God bless you, and may you be as happy in your own path as it would have been my heart's desire to have made you, had you gone with me in mine."

Solemnly he spoke, and his face seemed to have grown so stern in those last few minutes,

it almost frightened her. He took her hand, pressed it to his lips once, then wringing it with a pressure that absolutely hurt her, he dropped, almost threw it from him, and in a moment would have been out of sight, so rapid were his strides, but that a sudden thought impelled her to recall him.

Frank heard his name repeated in the well-known tones to which his foolish boy-heart had leapt for so many years; it again bounded within him as he responded to the call, and stood, in three hasty strides, once more by her side.

"You have left me here without ever thinking how I was to get home. You might have taken me back to the fly before you went away, I should think."

Hester Lockstone, you have done Frank Marsden greater service during the minute it took you to utter these words than you have ever done him before, or ever would do him, probably even in a long lifetime. True, they pierce into his sore heart like a two-edged broken knife, but, nevertheless, they are like the stroke of a skilful surgeon, which saves

from prolonged torture by acute present pain.

He smiled. Very bitter was his smile, but he bowed also, and very courteous was the bow—more so, Hester thought, than any she had ever seen him give. He patiently attended on her slow progress to the road, passively waited till the return of the fly, then handed all the ladies in; formally answered Sarah's sarcastic question regarding his own movements, when she saw he was not going with them, by stating his intention of walking back by the fields, bade them all a very polite good evening, and sauntered leisurely on, while the fly was still in sight. Once lost to view, and a startled deer would scarcely more than rival the speed with which the young man commenced his return homewards.

Poor Frank! It was a bitter lesson he had had—a very sudden and grievous loss he had sustained. Not only had he learnt his idol was very clay, but worse; he had not only lost his first love—his affianced bride—but he had lost her from his heart, his me-

mory; the creation he imagined was his own, was not—had never been.

What a tide of mingled feelings, all more or less painful, goad the poor lad on, trying to lose in violent physical exertion that sense of mental torture which seems so overwhelming. He is not thankful for the dispelling of his blindness now—feels he would rather have gone stumbling on in the pleasant ways of such darkness. But cheer up, Frank! You will recognise the blessing of sight some day if you can fight manfully with your present misery now, and perhaps rejoice in the painful operation that made it so sure and safe, bitter as the trial now seems.

He cannot rest in Merestown when he gets there; and so, within an hour or two of that farewell scene in Linwood Spinney, Frank Marsden is galloping off to the nearest cross-road to meet the London coach, which will carry him back to daily work and the heat of business, and, as he hopes, forgetfulness.

And Hester! Does she repent as she realizes the fact, now made known by her father to the rest of the family, that Frank

Marsden is lost to her for ever?—that she is once more a disengaged young lady? No. At first she missed him in his bodily presence and in his letters and presents, and she was more peevish and complaining in consequence. But new interests arose. Lovers were not wanting—had not been before to pretty-faced Hester Lockstone—were still less likely to be so to Miss Lockstone of the Manor, as she complacently reflected; and, after all, Frank was not half so pleasant as when he was a boy. He had such odd notions, too, and had startled her so while he was down this last time. She dared to say they should not have suited at all well together, though she had so liked him once; and Mr. Geld-finder was almost as good-looking, and a great deal more considerate of all her feelings! So argued the Merestown beauty—and so was finally severed the link *Love* was supposed to have forged between Hester Lockstone and Frank Marsden!

CHAPTER VII.

THE little square house in Newman's Buildings was not so strange to its inhabitants now. Three months, ay, more than three had passed away, and though Mrs. Lee and Mabel still felt it would always be impossible to call it *home*, yet they had begun to be familiar with its general aspect—accustomed to the size and height of the rooms, and to feel, in a limited sense, though this was almost unknown to themselves, that it was there in very truth their Penates did now abide.

One dull December day Mabel sat alone by the solitary window of their sitting-room, gazing abstractedly forth on the monotonous, wearisome scene without, namely, a dusty road; alive at certain hours of the day, it is true, either with butchers' carts and bakers' boys, or with half-gentlemanly,

half-doubtful individuals returning from their day's business in town, but still very dull upon the whole, and excellently adapted for promoting that much dreaded, almost incurable disease yclept the blues—now looking half fondly at the flower-glass before her, not empty even now, midwinter as it is, for there blooms as fresh and sweet a nosegay as December can produce, which, if not so costly as one gathered in the conservatories of Lee Manor might have been, was yet very precious in Mabel's eyes—more precious, perchance, even than one from them would have been, since this gave constant pleasant proof of the staunch adherence, at least, of one friend to the Lees, even in their present low estate.

They came from the old Rectory garden, just without the Manor House lodge-gates, and never a week passed without one at least, generally two, such reminders from the good old couple who dwelt therein—the rector, who had seen more than fifty winters hang their icy pendants from the trees and roofs of their parish, and his grey-haired wife, who had dwelt with him among the people for

about as long. Both too infirm now for much distant visiting, especially in winter, or be sure those flowers would have been much oftener brought than sent.

Mabel was thinking this, and sighing over the fact of her father's enforced separation from his old associate, vainly wishing, as human beings will do, the impossibilities, which, if compassed, would in the very act annihilate the motives originating the wish, when she saw their one other true friend, Dr. Armsdaile, walking briskly up the path.

He had been there once before that day, but only to see his old friend and patient started with his wife for an airing in his brougham, the good doctor himself stating it as a necsssity that *both* his horse and himself *must* have exercise, which this arrangement would give both without inconvenience to either, thus doing away all Mrs. Lee's and Mabel's scruples on the score of using what he must need himself.

He had been a short round on foot since seeing them safely off, and now returned for the purpose of a private and confidential chat

with Mabel, whom he found, as he expected and intended, alone.

"Well, little lady," he exclaimed, his name for her ever since she could toddle round a room alone, "so here you are in solitary grandeur, eh? 'Monarch of all you survey' in any case, child, whether that be great or small; so cheer up, little lady, I must not have you grow one whit paler or thinner, there's not a bit to spare of you, and I can't and won't change my comparative! *Least lady* does not suit my 'most musical ear' at all, though, sooth to say, it would assuredly be 'most melancholy'!"

Mabel looked up, gratefully smiling at the beginning of this address, and finally laughed outright at its conclusion. The doctor's serio-comic expression, both of face and tone, joined to his absurdly mixed quotations, was irresistible.

"I don't think I am thin, doctor, and you know I was never famous for very rosy cheeks. Edward got all my share in that way, I believe. Look at the picture he had done for mamma, in town. It ought to have come

long ago, but we only had it yesterday."

And she opened a little case on the table, and displayed the bright happy features of a healthy, hopeful lad just verging into manhood.

Tears rose to the sister's eyes as she gazed on it, and even Dr. Armsdaile blew his nose somewhat louder than ordinary, after studying the familiar features for a few minutes. Heir, a worthy heir, too, of the long and noble race of Lee, yet an exile from his country, self-banished from his home, in the vain hope of redeeming the patrimony of which he was already robbed!

"Confound that entail business!" muttered the doctor under his breath.

And then to conceal the emotion roused within; he spoke once more abruptly, and almost roughly, to his gentle companion.

"Yes! yes, very well done. Very like him, too; but I did not come here to waste time over that, Mistress Mabel, but to have a little rational talk with you. How are you getting on?"

Mabel knew the doctor well, so she shut

up the case, with one lingering look and sigh, dried her eyes, and sitting down on the sofa by her old friend's side, prepared to answer the catechism she foresaw impending, as she knew he liked to be answered.

"Better, much better than we dared hope. He appears quite used to this place now, and if anything is going on in the road, it seems even to amuse him."

"I told you so, my frightened fawn. Not fidgety or restless at all?"

"Oh! yes, sometimes—but very seldom, considering; and he is quite used to one room and Dorothy now."

"Ah! no complaints?"

"Very few. The old restlessness, when the time came for his usual drive or ride, is nearly gone off. The only times at all bad are dressing and undressing. He is very fidgety then, and seems to miss Richard terribly."

"Ever ask for him by name?"

"Not often; but he has done so. He cannot bear mamma or I should do anything for him, and yet to have Dorothy in makes it worse."

"Of course. Don't attempt that. Let him do all he can for himself—as much as possible. Ah! it's a cruel thing at his time of life. Teach your boys to be their own valets in time of need, if they are to be as rich as Crœsus!"

This was not exactly intended for Mabel's future guidance in respect to her possible sons, but an aphorism enunciated for the public benefit of all and sundry to whom it might chance to apply.

"He does almost everything for himself now, and I think, when he does not think about its being strange, the effort amuses and occupies him."

"Right, like my little lady's wisdom! Ah! we shall do very well—better than I expected even. We have come triumphantly out of the worst slough, and now we shall go on capitally—capitally, no doubt!"

But the energetic tone in which the poor doctor reiterated that word was somewhat belied by the deep sigh heralding its utterance. The picture of that blank future, so triumphantly anticipated in words, was too

much for him, as it spread out before his fancy, poverty-stricken, saddened by separation, deprivation!

Mabel's eyes grew moist again, too, in spite of her, as she said sadly,

"There is only one thing I very much dread now, Mr. ——, that—that man's visits. They——"

"Man's visits!—what man? That—you don't mean to say that d——d scoundrel, begging your pardon, Mabel? I can't help it—you don't mean that he dares intrude himself on your father *now?*—that very devil in man's guise, Stephen Lockstone!"

"Indeed he does; and my father is always so upset by his visits that I dread them more than anything. It was bad enough when we were at *home* when he came, but here it is a thousand times worse. They seem to rouse up all the old feelings and associations in my father's mind, besides being so evidently frightening to him in themselves."

"Frightening! He doesn't dare threaten more mischief, does he? Indeed, there is

none that he can do, that I know of. He has taken good care to do his worst."

"Oh, no, no! He makes his visits on some plea of business, though I don't know what it can be, and he is very civil always."

"Damn him!" muttered the doctor under his breath, but very heartily, and then continued aloud, "Why don't you refuse him admittance, Mabel?—he can have no right here."

"I did think of it, but mamma and I both feared doing more mischief. You see, he still holds the place of my father's man of business, and it seems hardly possible to deny his entrance. If anything farther wrong arose, it might be said that was the reason."

"Man of business!—pshaw! it is perfectly ridiculous. The man who holds the estate man of business to the one who has lost it! Absurd anomaly on the face of it! However, I am afraid you are right—better not quarrel with the brute in your peculiar circumstances. Whew! I only wish I was a lawyer."

And Dr. Armsdaile, much discomposed, began pacing up and down the little square

room, very much like a lion freshly caged at the Zoological Gardens. Presently Mabel said,

"He used to see my father alone at the Manor, but I have been afraid to leave them together, and always stay in the room. He has never asked me to go, though I think he often wishes me away. I fancy my presence keeps my father quieter."

"Quite right again, my dear. Don't on any account let him have my poor friend all to himself. But this annoyance must be stopped, Mabel—indeed it must; and, besides, there are other things should be seen into and settled. I wonder what the fellow wants now?—there's something about this business I never could understand. Ah!" and the doctor stopped, or, at any rate, did not continue his musings aloud. He did not care to speak of the weakness of the father before the loving, venerating daughter, especially now that that father was so afflicted. Perhaps, after all, it had been natural physical infirmity, undeveloped as yet to its full extent, which had originated the extreme weakness of character

displayed in some acts of poor old Mr. Lee's life. It might be so. At any rate, he could not speak to Mabel as he would have done had she not been the daughter of his patient. He looked at her instead, and presently his thoughts reverted to the old strain, and he again repeated,

"It must be stopped!"

Mabel did not answer, but her wistful eyes told how eagerly she desired that it might, and how gladly she would use any means pointed out for the purpose. The doctor still looked at her, but did not speak till he had taken another turn or two through the room; then he came back, and sat down by her again, asking, as he did so:

"Does your brother know the worst?"

Mabel coloured.

"No—not yet. Oh! doctor, it would be so hard just as—so full of hope and eagerness—he is thinking he is sure to succeed—to be told it is all in vain. It would be too cruel!"

"It would not be cruel, but the kindest thing, as his sensible little sister would allow,

if she could judge of it dispassionately. Mabel, he must be told. It is right—absolutely necessary, indeed. Besides, do you believe my experience, little lady?—The blow will be sharp enough, I don't deny, but it will fall less heavily now, in the first excitement and novelty of his new life and exertions, than when they have become a weary life work, and this false hope of redeeming the old Manor the one bright vision which alone gilds and lightens them. Mabel, you must write at once."

Again Mabel's colour came and went, and she faltered—

"But, besides my brother, my uncle, mamma——"

"I know—I know all about it; but never mind that—mamma won't, when she finds how much good conquering that—well, that little bit of feminine feeling will do, as I feel convinced it will. Have no more secrets from your uncle, Mabel. I don't know him myself, but from all I have heard—yes, I mean it—and being your mother's own brother, he cannot fail to be worth trusting,

in spite of any old prejudices and delusions he may see fit to cling to. Has he not received your brother with open arms?"

"Of course," and Mabel's little figure dilated with something of family as well as sisterly pride as she spoke the word, and looked very expressively, too, as if she would have added, "Who could help doing so? A Lee, and such a Lee, to seek a trading uncle out in America! Was it not an honour to be so sought, even if the Lee did chance to come well-nigh penniless to seek his fortune with that uncle's help."

Dr. Armsdaile laughed as he watched his gentle favourite, albeit in no merry mood.

"Ah! Mistress Mabel Lee, you would make a good fellow-picture now to that one in the old gallery yonder of your kinswoman and namesake, some time maid of honour to poor Henrietta Maria, and afterwards the haughty reprover of her fugitive son's mistimed gallantry. I wish Uncle Charlton could see you now, Mabel. He could not quarrel with you, I think, for being so true a Lee, looking as you do now, though I

believe he made Edward doubly welcome because he was so like your mother."

Dr. Armsdaile said the last words slowly. He meant them to have due effect on his listener, and so they had. The soft flush mounted again into the fair cheek, and the head bowed down a little, as she said, after a little struggle with herself:

"I will write, if you think I ought."

"I do think so, Mabel, and that without delay. You are left here with no natural guardian. Your poor father's state renders him unfit to be troubled with business details, and yet we cannot safely refuse to let this man see him, unless something can be definitely settled by those who can properly represent your father. That were reason enough, but there are others which imperatively demand your letting your brother know, without delay, the extreme step taken by this man. Indeed, he should have been written to at once," and Dr. Armsdaile once more began his march up and down the room, with a vexed mind and a troubled brow.

Mabel did not speak. She had undertaken a most distasteful task, and was meditating how best to perform it. To tell the darling brother of the hopelessness of his most cherished schemes!—prove that the unknown uncle's prognostics of ruin following sooner or later on such weak yieldings and helpless submissions as her father's had been only too true!—it was a bitter task. She knew nothing of her uncle beyond his annoyance at his sister's marriage without the necessary business forms he would have considered the first essentials in such a step, and the scarcely-veiled contempt he had expressed as to some of her father's later proceedings in regard to his embarrassments; and she reverenced—adored that father. No marvel she shrank from the work before her.

And so each continued the train of their reflections, till roused to the consciousness of the present, and the necessity of shaking off all outward signs, at least, of gloom and sorrow, by the return of the old lord of Lee Manor and his wife.

CHAPTER VIII.

BERNARD LEE had been an only child, and his mother dying when he was a mere infant, he had been left entirely to the guardianship of a proud and somwhat passionate father, with no gentle, refined feminine influence to counterbalance any mischievous bias given to his character by such ungenial wardenship.

His father was wedded to old customs, old times, old exclusiveness, but there was much sterling worth of character and honesty, if not warmth of heart, beneath the formal cold exterior which distinguished his ordinary demeanour. The one master-passion of his existence, however, was the pride of family descent. In the proud consciousness of the antiquity of the Lee race, their pure patrician blood, the centuries wherein the Manor had

uninterruptedly descended from father to son in their family, he lived, moved, breathed. An unsuitable alliance—a tarnish of any sort on the name of Lee—would have been worse than death!

Bernard's disposition scarcely fitted him for a congenial son to such a father. True, he passionately loved his home, and had inherited to a certain extent the family pride in it and their name, which was as the very breath of existence to his father; but he was of a lighter, more jovial temper, quite subscribed to Solomon's maxim, that "much study," or much thought even, is "a weariness to the flesh," and could often find great pastime, nay, real enjoyment, in company and occupation by no means suited to his father's taste, and which that father considered it almost a degradation to share in. So, in process of years, it happened that, after Bernard's residence from home to finish his education, and his consequent mixing with much and various society, a circumstance neither new nor uncommon came to pass—a certain distance and estrangement grew up between

these two, the cold, proud, yet fond father—the young joy-loving, yet affectionate son. The one lived all alone and stately in his old Manor House, thinking harder thoughts daily of his absent son—the other wandered here and there, enjoying the many pleasures life offered him, sometimes thinking little of his father, it must be confessed, or of the old name and home, but always fondly and kindly when he did remember them, and now and again with a half sigh, an earnest wish he could get on better with that father. He would have done it if he could, he thought, but Nature had denied him the perception of the way; and, alas! there was no loving, honoured wife and mother to guide the boy's conduct, or soothe the chafed spirit of the father.

So years passed on, and matters between Bernard and his father did not mend. He had wished his son to marry a daughter of one of the neighbouring county families, as highborn as themselves, and titled to boot, but the stately and not very young lady was not to the youth's taste, and the match never took place. Then Bernard was as open-

handed as he was open-hearted, and spent more money than his father, albeit no niggard, thought at all necessary for the maintenance of even his son. A remittance was refused; the young man's spirit was roused—he applied to his father no more, but in an evil hour took to raising money, as many of his friends were wont to do, but as he had never done before.

So things progressed, and the heir of all the Lee honours was no longer a young man, and still unmarried, to his father's chagrin, when chance threw him in somewhat close companionship with a young and very pretty woman. Agnes Charlton was an orphan, and residing with well-born though distant relatives; but her father had been a London merchant, and not a very rich one—her brother was at that moment an American *trader*, as Mr. Lee, senior, would have called him. Was this a fitting match?—a girl so connected the suitable mate for Bernard Lee?

His father, now an old man, was horror-stricken at the notion, and absolutely and

unconditionally refused his consent, saying some hard things, too, of the unknown, unseen innamorata of his son, which stung that personage to the quick. He felt his father was unjust, unkind, exacting more than human nature could endure. What if Agnes' father had been a merchant—he was a respectable man, ay, and a well-born one too, very nearly equal to the Lees in good descent, if it came to that, though his family had fallen in the world! So he brooded over the matter in passionate anger and disappointment for a while, and then—rebelled! His father vowed he would never see his face again, or suffer him to cross the threshold of the Manor House in his lifetime!

The son repented and sorrowed; the young wife, who had not been told the state of the case before her marriage, pined and wept, and bitterly reproached herself, innocent though she was; and Bernard began to fear for her safety, and for the life of another little being who was expected in the future, to bless their little household with the purity of its young spirit. He humbled

himself to his father as he had never done before—explained, entreated, urged. For awhile no answer was vouchsafed. At last one came; the boon he asked should be accorded, but on certain conditions—and what conditions?—that he joined instantly with his father in cutting off the entail. He would have indignantly and at once refused, but for his wife's earnest entreaties.

"What did it matter? They could not hope for happiness while under such a ban as a father's curse; only let that be removed ere the birth of their own child. What matter, once free from that, how poor they were?—She did not care; she would not care, so long as Bernard was with her, and free from that dreadful malediction."

So he yielded, though his heart sunk within him as he looked at her earnest, lovely face—thought of the beautiful home he had hoped to give her, and of the probability that it was exactly to avoid such a *disgrace* as the old Manor's ever descending to any child of hers, which had induced his father to relent on such terms as those to which he had acceded.

The young couple were then on the Continent, Bernard's means at this time making a cheap residence very desirable, if not necessary, and he had to hasten to England with what speed he could, to comply with his father's wishes before it might, perhaps, be too late. Stephen Lockstone was then, as now, the agent and man of business for the Lee Manor estate. How much he had to do with the singular resolution of the elder Mr. Lee—if he had anything to do with it—rested between him and his conscience. Bernard never suspected that he had, on the contrary, habitually applied to him for advice, and even assistance, in all his own difficulties. The entail was cut off, the son forgiven, though with but a bad grace, and he had the satisfaction of reflecting that his own act had enabled his father to rob his own children—nay, himself, of their rightful inheritance, should such be that father's pleasure.

A succession of painful events, however, hurried fast on each other after this, and had Mr. Lee formed any such resolve, it subse-

quently appeared he had either not the inclination or the leisure to carry it out.

Bernard was hurried off again by the news of the premature confinement and dangerous illness of his young wife, whose infant had died; and when she recovered, he was himself seized with brain fever, the result of all the mental excitement and agitation he had of late undergone, and for awhile his life was despaired of. Natural affection in the old father's mind now, for the first time, superseded every other feeling. He hastened to his son with a speed the effects of which shortened his own life, made acquaintance with his obnoxious but fair daughter-in-law, and discovered, all too late, that she was not unworthy to be the mistress of Lee Manor —the mother of a future generation of Lees.

The old man returned home softened, altered, troubled in mind, and before Bernard and his family, travelling homewards also, but more slowly, had touched the soil of their native land, he lay at the point of death. An express brought his son to his side ere he

breathed his last, but hardly in time to hear more from his father than his dying blessing on him and his; and Bernard had scarcely time to realise his loss and gain—for Lee Manor was his, no will in favour of the distant cousin having been made—before he was again prostrated with a worse attack than before of his old complaint.

He recovered at last, but very slowly, and Dr. Armsdaile's private opinion, though he never uttered it to either wife or daughter, was that Mr. Lee was never the same man after that last attack, either physically or mentally; and, indeed, even his fond wife could not diguise from herself that his memory had failed sadly, and that occasionally he was weak as a child in some matters, for many weary months, though she did fondly flatter herself that these symptoms gradually wore off. Mr. Stephen Lockstone, meanwhile, was in his element; undisputedly he reigned over the whole estate, arranged all Mr. Lee's affairs, and negotiated with the harpy creditors, whom, in an evil hour, years ago, Bernard had dealt with for ready money and

present ease, at a heavy cost for the future. All this Stephen Lockstone did. With what result time had now made only too evident!

Owing to the painful circumstances under which Lee Manor welcomed its new owner and his wife, none of the neighbouring gentry made immediate calls on them; and subsequently rumour gave out such strange versions of the truth (whence emanating no one could discover—Stephen Lockstone *might* know), both as regarded Mrs. Lee's maiden connexions, the marriage, the family disunion, and the cutting off the entail, that people were shy of making many advances to intimacy with them. This roused the passionate, almost unreasoning resentment of Mr. Lee, who haughtily drew back from anything but the most distant and formal exchange of civilities, when, in process of time, a few calls were made; and this, together with his own increasing weakness of intellect, had reduced their intercourse with the county families generally to something so slight, that the young Lees hardly knew one of them by name.

However, for several years things within the Manor House appeared to go on most quietly and pleasantly; Mr. Lee's health improved, and although his former buoyant spirits were replaced by an almost indolent quietness, yet he seemed thoroughly to enjoy all the home-pursuits and amusements of a country gentleman, pursued in a quiet, lazy way, and he, his wife, and children were completely happy.

But there was a dark cloud looming overhead, though to their happy minds, the wife and children unsuspicious and ignorant, the husband and father supine and trusting, it was entirely invisible; yet day by day, and month, by month it grew and darkened, fast and fearfully.

At last the time arrived when, in Stephen Lockstone's opinion, the shadow of that dismally black thunder chariot should be partially displayed before the terrified gaze of the Lord of the Manor House; and Bernard Lee learnt that his estate, the home of his forefathers, the birthplace of himself, his son—the place had grown dearer and more precious every

year of his later life, till he had come to regard it almost as sacredly as had his father—was heavily mortgaged, hopelessly entangled; that Edward's birthright was indeed alienated now, and not by his grandfather's quickly repented deed, but by his own father's negligent supineness.

Bitter was the knowledge to the shaken mind of the already aged Bernard Lee. He was stung to the quick, and struggled for a while manfully but uselessly—hopelessly. The new-born energy and wonderful acuteness which, with extreme effort, he brought to bear on his personal inquiry into the state of his affairs, were begot by efforts too great to be persevered in for a long continuance, and at terrible risk to his enfeebled intellect. The accounts were very complicated—Mr. Lockstone himself seemed hopeless, desponding; and when, in utter despair, the poor father hinted at renewing the entail, the lawyer most reluctantly, as it appeared, rather mysteriously, and yet all too plainly, conveyed to the unhappy man that this was a step impossible to be taken—the creditors would interfere, and

successfully, he feared. It was too late!

This was the last drop in the unfortunate father's brimming cup of sorrow and self-reproach. His mind nearly gave way under that shock, and a discovery suddenly made completed the mischief. Though not absolutely imbecile, he became so nearly so, that Mr. Lockstone was alarmed lest higher authority should step in and take the matter up. For awhile all further proceedings were arrested, and in time Mr. Lee became better; really less capable than before of entering into business, it is true, but safer from the charge of incapacity, since there was no one sufficiently interested to bring it against him; as, so long as he was not too ostensibly incompetent, there was little danger of the fond hearts round him interfering in business, in any way that could prove him worse than he really was.

It was necessary, however, that the facts of the charges on the estate should become known to those other innocent dwellers in the old Manor House. Gradually, therefore, the truth, or something like the truth, was unfolded.

Carefully, judiciously was it done, Stephen Lockstone! and for awhile no distrust, no dislike or dread of you, arose in those simple hearts. All went on instead as you could have most desired, but least expected, in one instance at least; for Edward, instead of returning to Oxford, where he had just kept one term, resolved, nobly and promptly, to seek out his trading uncle in America, and try to be as fortunate in winning money as report said the latter had been. The women tried to retrench as much as in their small knowledge of the reality of poverty they believed possible; and so some few more months went by, and then the stroke came which brought about the changes detailed in a former chapter, and Stephen Lockstone was no longer so implicitly reposed in, even by the two helpless, innocent women left behind by the young son and brother, under his care, to guard their helpless broken father.

Not many days after Mr. Armsdaile's visit, one of Mr. Lockstone's, those so much dreaded by Mabel, occurred. She was sitting at her father's feet, chatting and laughing with him, almost as she would have done to a child,

when the click of their little front gate made her look up, and she saw the one person on earth whom she had well-nigh learnt to hate, gentle as was her nature, coming up the path.

Her first impulse was to bid Deborah deny them to him, but she checked it. To what end, since it would but defer the evil day. If denied now, he would come back within the week, as experience had taught her. No; let him come now, and it would be over. Her father was tolerable to-day—better fitted to see him, and her mother was out. Gone marketing! It was lucky for the lady of Lee Manor, as well as for her reduced household, that early acquaintance with the straits of a limited income prevented this being such an utter impossibility to *her* as it would have been to most others fallen from her position in the world.

Stephen Lockstone's was not, had never been a firm manly tread, such a one as seems to bear witness to the hearty honest purpose of him who uses it, and his resolve to fulfil that purpose to the best of his ability. No, it was a doubtful, hesitating step, ever advanc-

ing certainly, but edgeways as it seemed, to whatever object he had in view. Quite determined to reach it, but ready to make such *détours* or windings as might hold out any prospect of advantage; and to-day the gait seemed less assured, the tread less erect, and the sidelong glances from his downcast eyes more oblique than ever.

Mabel thought so, as she watched his approach, and was conscious of a creeping shudder pervading her whole frame, such as she might have felt at the sight of a noxious serpent, as she turned to prepare her father for his entrance.

"Papa, dear, here is Mr. Lockstone coming in. I suppose he wishes to have a little business talk with you to-day."

The old man's face, which had been placid, almost happy, in its expression, underwent a singular change. A worn, harassed, frightened look spread over the features, very painful to see, but such as the fond daughter had been only too familiar with in past days. He looked up helplessly at her, and muttered something unintelligible; while Deborah, with "most vine-

gar aspect," ushered the lawyer into their presence. He was the first to speak, though with some hesitation and embarrassment.

Good morning, my dear sir; I hope I see you better to-day. Good morning, Miss Mabel. Ah—a fine day—ahem!"

Mr. Lee still glanced askance at his visitor, and up at Mabel, as if asking and relying on her assistance, without giving any reply to the lawyer; and she answered him with a cold dignity of manner, under which, armour proof, as he was, with selfish fraud and insensibility, he could not forbear wincing a little.

"Good morning, Mr. Lockstone. My father, as you see, continues very much the same. If you have anything on which you wish to speak to him, may I beg you will do it at once, and make the interview as short as possible. Dr. Armsdaile forbids all harassment or excitement."

"Yes, yes, I know, Miss Mabel—I'll be as careful as possible, but you see it is necessary I should see him sometimes. I trouble him as little as—I can.

The last words were almost inaudible. Mabel

had fixed her clear blue eyes upon the speaker, and, in spite of himself, they met his own and seemed to look into his very soul. He changed colour, and became at last deadly pale. He had never *met* such a look in his life before. Sarah's were not pleasant to encounter sometimes; but that—he quailed before it.

Mabel saw her advantage, but unhappily she was too young and inexperienced to follow it up. Her tender heart melted at the evidently genuine confusion of the man. She hoped, in her innocence, that he might be repentant, and she motioned him to be seated; an advantage he was by no means slow to avail himself of.

"I shan't detain Mr. Lee long, Miss Mabel; it's nothing very important I came for, only a paper or two to show him, that he may see they are right and attest them."

Mabel already dimly conscious of her wrong move, bowed her head impatiently, and resumed her own seat close to her father. The lawyer pulled some papers from his pocket and kept looking first at one then another as if waiting for something, but Mabel did not go, and presently poor old Mr. Lee, partly himself

again from the very extremity of the agitation which dislike to his visitor and any allusion to business were now almost certain to bring on, said impatiently,

"What am I to do, Lockstone? Let me do it, I want to get it over. I'm going out directly, Mabel, shan't I?"

"Yes, dear father," she whispered, pressing his hand, and looking once more towards the lawyer, tried again if that glance was indeed a spell. No. At least no very potent one now. She had lost the chance of making it so, for Mr. Lockstone would *not meet* it, and though not absolutely comfortable, even when only *feeling* the scrutiny of those fearless truth-speaking eyes, he was not going to alter his course for them, or yield a second time to any such momentary weakness as had attacked him before.

"You will just sign these papers, my dear sir; I think they are the last, if my memory serves me right," and he busied himself with the pen and ink before him.

Mr. Lee took up the pen with a trembling hand. The lawyer ran over the papers, which

were not very important documents, though sounding terrible to Mabel's ears, understanding as they did not one word of the repeated tautology of which, as it seemed to her, they were composed, and her father began signing them with a little irritability of manner, it is true, but very passively.

The last was before him when Mr. Lockstone, suddenly looking up to Mabel with something of the same cadaverous look on his face as had raised her compassion before, said in a broken voice,

"Miss Mabel—I—I am very much ashamed, but might I ask for a glass of water. I am very faint."

Poor Mabel! She knew Deborah was out! She must herself bring that glass of water to this arch enemy. She, on whose slightest gesture so many eager servants of the house had once attended, this man among the number. It was hard. For the meanest beggar she would have done it, ay, and more than gladly, with alacrity, but for this man—for a second pride and compassion struggled within—the last conquered, and she rose and left the room.

Mr. Lockstone revived in a most wonderful manner as she disappeared in search of the water. Had he heard Deborah go out, a minute or so before?

His proceedings would seem to infer as much, for no sooner had the door closed than he sat up briskly in his chair, laid his hand on Mr. Lee's arm, and putting his lips close to the terrified old man's ear, hissed out, in a tone of semi-command and threat,

"Is that old deed found yet, sir? It must be, you know, and the sooner the better. Will you tell me where it is, or not?"

Stephen Lockstone had small sympathy with others, small knowledge, therefore, how to deal with an infirm old man like Mr. Lee, or he would not have attacked him thus. The only answer to his query was a helpless cry, almost like that of an infant, and the poor soul shook and trembled like one in an ague, with his efforts to gasp forth "No—no," while his whole face was deformed by terror.

Once more Stephen Lockstone bent forward, once more his face approached that of his old [illegible]ter, when Mabel opened the door, and the

lawyer, with a guilty start, sunk again in his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

Mabel was not naturally suspicious; the freshness of youth was about her still, despite all that had passed, but as her quick eye detected her father's state, the thought flashed on her that she had been purposely deluded into leaving the room. She flew to her father's side and fondly put her arms about him. He clung to her desperately and fearfully, in a way it was pitiable to behold in a man who should have been yet strong and hearty, protecting instead of protected by that slight young girl.

"What have you dared to do to my father, sir?" demanded Mabel, in a voice so stern and commanding it startled herself.

"I?" cried Mr. Lockstone, who had been languidly sipping the water, his hand still over his eyes, and now prepared for his *rôle*. "I done? God bless my soul!" looking up. "What is the matter, my dear sir? Shall I call assistance, Miss Mabel?"

"No, Mr. Lockstone, but one thing, if you *will* do, and *at once*, I shall be obliged to you," and Mabel, her eyes flashing, glanced too

significantly towards the door for even Mr. Lockstone to be able wilfully to misunderstand her desire.

He did not at that instant feel equal to resistance even, and slowly rising, muttered further embarrassed assurances of his having done and said nothing; and with a farewell, to which neither father nor daughter responded, took himself off at last.

CHAPTER IX.

CHRISTMAS was come. Christmas! that time of hospitality and happiness, of family reunion and Christian thanksgiving, of jovial merry-makings with equals and liberal charities to inferiors—that time when, of all others, if at all, a man would think seriously of fulfilling his part on earth as a Christian, small as that part might be, in promoting "peace on earth, and good-will amongst his fellows!"

Sarah Lockstone, it is to be hoped, did hers, so far as her own family, at least, were concerned, when she vigorously kept her father up to the mark, and untiringly fought against the wavering moods which often endangered the keeping of that much-talked-of promise—the spending Christmas at Lee Manor.

It was hard work, no doubt, and the scenes

ensuing from her valiant prowess were certainly more stormy than peaceful while enacting; but she gained her end at last, and then, one may trust, peace was ensured in the family for good—on that point at least. But they were not to move till Christmas Eve; all her efforts failed to accomplish a speedier transit. Before Christmas Eve it was not to be, and as the time approached her father's face, consenting though he was, grew more and more anxious and gloomy.

The night before they were to leave High Street, Hester and Sarah were together in their room; the one already in bed, but watching her sister with wide open though languid eyes, the other sitting in front of the fire, and looking into it fixedly, her raven hair set free, and hanging about her shoulders in very picturesque disorder.

A striking picture Sarah would have made at this moment, truly; her handsome features in repose, the cynical expression on them less visible than in general, and her attitude such as gave her figure just that unbending ease which it sometimes lacked. She would have

been a splendid model at that instant for a Juno brooding in her privacy how best to counteract her Jove in some actions thwarting her own imperial will.

"Are you going to sit there all night, Sarah?" asked her sister at last.

"Not quite. At least, I have not resolved that I will yet, unless you are particularly anxious that I should. Keep a vigil through our last twelve hours of darkness in this old house? Ha! ha!" and she laughed a low peculiar laugh.

"How can you be so silly, Sarah? Of course I only want you to go to bed, and not keep me awake so. Oh! I am so tired!"

Ah! that's a novelty, isn't it, Hester? I should have thought Messrs. Geldfinder and Felmer's small doses of incense had not been so wearying as all that! A powerful narcotic some folks might have found them!"

"There you are again! I can't bear you, Sarah, when you're in those moods. I wish you'd get some one for yourself, and then perhaps you wouldn't tease me so—that I do!"

"A very kind sisterly wish! Thank you!

Now couldn't you spare one of your two or *three*, I may say, if not more, to me, don't you think? Turn one of them over to-morrow! Don't you think he'd be willing?" and Sarah turned her flashing, mocking eyes to her sister's face.

"I don't know—I don't care. How tiresome you are!" and Hester coloured a little —a very little.

"Ah!" and again she laughed her low mischievous laugh. She knew if Hester was touchy on one especial point, or proud of one possession, it was concerning the lovers she had and her sister had not. "However," she proceeded, "I don't want to make any such bargain with you to-night, Hester, so you needn't be afraid. One thing I was going to say. What if we shouldn't stay at Lee Manor after all?"

"What?" cried Hester, and she absolutely raised herself in bed, so great was her excitement, and looked wild and terrified at her sister. Sarah watched her composedly, and with much apparent satisfaction, for some time, but when the interrogative was repeated,

with the addition, "Whatever can you mean?" she condescended to answer.

"Not very much; but if the very prospect of going there makes our brave father look as he has done this last week, why, I don't think he'll stay there very long, that's all!"

"But, Sarah. Oh! dear. Surely you'll do something? If he doesn't stay, surely we can? Oh! dear! It would be worse than not going at all!"

"For once in your life you are right, Hester. It would be much worse, but not in the sense you mean." She paused, and leaned thoughtfully on her hand, then went on, more to herself than her sister. "To get acquainted with the neighbourhood—just gain one's point, and then shrink back again. Oh! no, it will not do at all."

"No, of course it won't. What put such a dreadful notion into your head, Sarah, I cannot think."

"Have you not seen how your father's altered, nor how sour he begins to look now the evil day is come?"

"Oh! I don't know, he never looks very

pleasant, does he? Is that all? I was afraid you knew something."

"So I do, Hester, a good many things. Oh! you need not get frightened again, nothing *you* will think very dreadful. It won't affect Mr. Geldfinder, or Mr. Felmer, or young Turner, or the Hitchcocks. Not even you—not even you, in a very great degree. But I do know when a man is too great a coward to reap the harvest he has taken such care to sow, and is willing, almost ready, to shrink from laying even one little finger on it himself."

"Sarah, you are very tiresome. You frighten me to death, and then say it is all nothing. I wish you wouldn't!" the ordinary peevish burden of her song.

"I never said it was *nothing*. Only nothing that need trouble *you* very much, if you play your cards well, Hester. And now I'm going to bed, and don't mean to talk any more."

Hester murmured a dissatisfied answer, but she knew from experience how useless it was to seek to get more from her sister after such a fiat had gone forth, and both the girls—

heiresses of Lee Manor now—were soon asleep.

Christmas! Christmas Eve! Bright, clear, and frosty dawned the morning of that day. Not only was it Christmas, but the real, old-fashioned English Christmas—snow upon the ground two feet deep or more in untrodden places, where traffic and labour failed to come; the beaten roads hard and ringing; the air crisp and pleasant, though sharp and a little biting, it may be; the sun bright and cheering after the day was old enough for him to have strength to dissipate the morning mist; in short, it was a bright, fine, joyous Christmas-time, so far as genial weather could make it so.

The High Street of Merestown was by no means deserted when Mr. Lockstone's carriage drew up for the first time before his door. There were many happy faces to be seen there—boys and girls home for their holidays, all brimming over with the joy of freedom and home once more; quiet mothers, equally happy, but less demonstrative; a few proud fathers, inveigled away from business or study by the young generation "for a walk or

shopping, just this once, because it was Christmas-time;" young men and maidens holiday-making, too, and *perhaps* making something else, one or two of them, just a little, if one might judge from appearances, which strongly indicated that a certain little god had been at some mischief with bow and arrow.

Some, if not all of these passers-by, turned more than once to look back at the handsome carriage, as it stood there with its prancing steeds. The Lockstone daughters were both looking at it, too, from the shadow of their old-fashioned window. Hester, with quite a brightened face stirred from her ordinary languid indifference by gratified pride. It was delightful to know they should not leave the shabby old home so stylishly, unwatched. If the Fates were but propitious, even Mr. Geldfinder himself might pass to or from his luncheon at the moment, and young Turner's head was already visible over a distant blind, taking a critical, interested survey of the whole concern. It was very gratifying—just what it should be, and she was well satisfied

accordingly. Sarah's sharp black eyes were watching, too, but with a far different air. Gratified she certainly was, to a certain extent; but only from conscious power. It was her will that had thus arranged the manner of their flitting; her influence, the time. Except for that, she would perchance have been indifferent about the matter. A scornful amusement was now the dominant expression on her handsome face, as she curled her red lip contemptuously.

Stephen Lockstone, meanwhile, was pacing his own room with hurried steps, conscious that the hour had come for him to begin a new life, to come forth in another character, and feeling incompetent to meet that hour as he was conscious he ought, as Sarah would require him. He twisted his damp hands nervously together, glanced fearfully at the little common clock hanging in one corner of his den, and then stopped to listen if the carriage was really come; he had heard it stop, knew it must be his own, and yet pertinaciously clung to the impossible chance that it was not there. In vain. The time is come, and if he can-

not meet it as he should, there is one determined he shall meet it as he may.

The door opens suddenly, and Mr. Lockstone, in his startled fright, trembles before his own footman, after narrowly escaping falling into his arms.

The man was well-trained; but if the muscles of his mouth were adamant, his eyes danced with amusement as he said,

"If you please, sir, Miss Lockstone desired me to let you know they are waiting."

What! in his own old place of business, that old secret chamber which had witnessed so many self-colloquies, and could tell so much if it could but speak—even here, was he not still the lawyer Lockstone yet in here? Mr. Stephen Lockstone, your act's consequences will follow you everywhere—ay, even to the grave! No place is sacred from their intrusion; and in this very place, where the first thought of what might be, what *is* now, came to your scheming brain, so here begins that other life which looked so fair and full of promise then!

The grand old trees of the Manor Park

looked noble and magnificent in their shining winter garments of bright hoar frost, with here and there a glittering icicle depending from their branches, that the sun's rays had been too feeble to melt in the cold atmosphere, as the Lockstones skirted round the ample boundary of their new domain. But no one noticed them. Mr. Lockstone was not looking at anything apparently, his head rested on his breast, so as completely to conceal his face, and he never moved. Perhaps he was asleep. His wife seemed half afraid of her position by his side, and wholly occupied in keeping the very hem of her garments from touching or disturbing either him or Sarah. Hester leaned back luxuriously, with half-closed eyes, and was enjoying the ease of her position and the rapid motion with exceeding zest. Sarah, as usual, watched them all, alive to the peculiarities of each, and herself well amused with them, as she journeyed. True, she now and then looked from the window, but only to note what progress they had made. What were trees to her, when she had human beings —her fellow-creatures—to study and to laugh at?

The carriage rolled rapidly on; one sweep more, and they stood before the iron gates which should admit them to their much-coveted paradise. They were *not* open, and a flush rose to Sarah's brow as she perceived it.

"Father, why are not the gates open as they ought to be? Is this fitting welcome to a place for its master?" and she looked fixedly at her father as she spoke.

He started at her voice, and glanced hurriedly round, then gathered his senses about him, and as he too became aware of the negligence, grew into Stephen Lockstone again, and, angry and disturbed, looked from the carriage window.

There was a little lodge at the gates, small, but very picturesque, which had made the chief feature in many an old sketch of Mabel's, with its ivy-covered chimneys and curling smoke. No smoke, however, was there now; the pretty windows were shuttered and desolate—the whole place silent and deserted as the grave.

"This is some mistake. How is this?" said Mr. Lockstone hurriedly, as his eye

noted these facts, and the locked gates, which forbade farther progress into his new property.

The servant, meantime, had descended, and was shaking the gates, and calling for their absent guardian in no measured tones. The keen air, which had chilled him on his seat by the coachman, was by no means a pleasant atmosphere to be kept waiting in longer than could be possibly avoided.

Mr. Lockstone's pallor returned upon him as he gazed blankly at the silent lodge. The old couple who had dwelt there as long as he could remember even, he had believed, hoped would remain still. He had held out inducements for them to do so, had eagerly striven to play the condescending landlord and patron to them. He could not afford to lose one old retainer from the Lee property. The servants *had* left to a man. The tenants were many of them about to follow their example, all who *could*. They were a faithful race, and had most of them lived with the Lees, from father to son, for many generations, and the, world was a little younger, too, in those days. Mutations on so grand a scale were not fre-

quent in the county, and neither servants nor tenants regarded a change of masters and fealty as a matter trifling and easy as a change of clothes.

They were no worshippers of new lights for the sake of the warmth they might bestow. Besides, Stephen Lockstone, the rising sun of Lee Manor, was not liked by those who loved "the family." He was feared and despised much; loved, not at all. Hardly a cottage dweller would remain under the new landlord. Despise them, oh! ye more enlightened philosophers! They were blind, yea, blind as moles or bats to their own interests.

Stephen Lockstone gazed, but no sign of life, of living creature, was there about that quiet, desolate little lodge. The servant had suspended his shakes and shouts in despair. Not a sound broke the oppressive silence of those few moments, during which they all looked forth in despair on the fast-locked gates, the deserted cottage. The very horses stood motionless; not a jingle of their bright harness, not a deep-drawn breath was heard in that dull, heavy stillness. The raw,

piercing cold of the day, the dreary, misty air in which, as the afternoon drew on, they were enveloped, seemed for the moment so to have benumbed their faculties that they scarcely knew how to act.

Where were the old couple? How were they to enter their own park?

Suddenly, as they were all looking from one window, there appeared at the other a face, worn, wrinkled, lined by age and suffering, but full of resolution and fire still, lighted by eyes dark, piercing, and flashing as Sarah's own, full now of anger, mixed with a strange contempt, as they looked first at one, then at another inmate of the carriage.

The face belonged to a tall old woman, wrapped in a red cloak, which she had drawn tightly round her. Ordinarily she stooped so much from the weight of those many years which had perfectly silvered her once raven locks, that you had no idea what a Meg Merrilies she was in stature. But she looked Meg her very self now, as she met Stephen Lockstone's startled glance, and a smile of defiant scorn curled her lip.

He was willing to cling to a belief that all was right, that some mistake had made the lodge desolate so unexpectedly, and kept them there. He would *not* see her expression, but changing his own look and tone to almost cringing ones, began,

"Oh! dame, here you are," when she burst forth fiercely, impetuously,

"Yes, I am here, Stephen Lockstone, and I wish I were in my grave instead, before I see what I see this day—the servant in his master's place. D'ye think any *blessing* will light on ye *here*, man? *I* tell you no. As the woman says in the Bible, for bad woman though she was, it were a true word she spoke, that the man had no peace who took his king's place; so will there be no peace for you here. If he *slew* his master, you have done worse; better our master had died outright, than been driven to the state he has, and from *here;* and you, how *dare* ye come here?—don't ye fear the very walls will fall about your ears, you that have fattened and prospered on the wages of father and son? *Ye* to turn them out, to rob them of their

rights, who was born to live and die here, to send the beautiful boy, as should come to the Manor, like every Lee before him, for more years than man can count, over the sea, and steal away his own! Aren't ye afraid, Stephen Lockstone?"

She paused a moment—not for breath; old—feeble, as she generally was—energy and excitement had supplied that, as it had given her the strength and power to regain for awhile the height and uprightness of her youth; but she paused as though to emphasize the heinousness and enormity of that man's crime whom she was thus apostrophising. Mr. Lockstone appeared powerless to interrupt her. None but Sarah would have dared; and she—she chose to see the play played out without interfering.

The aged woman, her furrowed face one glow of excitement, her dark eyes flashing sparks of fire, one withered hand held up aloft in an attitude of warning, looked the very personification of a Sibyl of the ancient times, as she went on with heightened voice and threatening gesture:

"Do ye think to come here and live as those did before ye, who had a right to the place? Will ye and yer upstart brood within there live honoured and respected, think ye, and die in a good old age, wept and regretted? I tell you *no!* Ye have robbed the weak and the feeble, the young and the woman, and a curse will foller ye so long as ye hold yer ill-gotten gain! Did ye think *I* was going to wait on yer pleasure and eat yer bread? Not I! Sooner would I and my old man, grey-headed and feeble as we are, beg our bread from door to door through the snow of this winter! Go and seize on yer fine new home. May ye never know an hour's peace within it! May yer heart ache worse, ay, a thousand times worse, than theirs ever have ye turned out! Go, and an old woman's bitterest heart's curse go with ye, Stephen Lockstone!"

She violently flung the heavy gate-key into the carriage as she spoke, and was gone. It alighted in Hester's lap, who gave a startling scream, and this was the Lockstones' welcome to the Manor.

CHAPTER X.

MEANWHILE how had things been progressing at No. 5 Newman's Buildings? Very well, on the whole; the infirm old man, who should have been its stay and support, was no more like what a man of his years should have been, it is true, no less a wreck of his former manhood, still he had been shielded by Mabel's vigilence from any more interviews with Mr. Lockstone, and he was placid and quiescent, if nothing more. Mabel and her mother, the two most troubled, the only active hearts in the little household, had been very anxious regarding that communication to Edward, which, after many troubled cogitations on the matter, they had at last resolved on sending according to good Dr. Armsdaile's advice; and when at last it had gone forth on its bitter embassy, they waited very fearfully, and in much disquietude, for

the result, in anxious pain and foreboding as to its effect on the well-loved son and brother, but beyond this they were happier. Almost content in the new home, enjoying a species of repose and assurance, in this end of all the painful uncertainties and changes in which they had previously lived, which was very welcome, and when at last an answer came from Edward, more satisfactory than either had dared to hope for, there seemed something of happiness in life again; that letter appeared for the moment as the herald of a time of jubilee, a year of release.

Dr. Armsdaile had been quite right about Edward. His answer surprised, almost disappointed, while it delighted his mother and sister. True, there was much indignation, great wrath against Stephen Lockstone, and some lamentation; but there was also a great deal about his own new life, his hopes for the future, his interest in all the novelty surrounding him. The one object of his life, over which he had so brooded the last year of his home-life, in which alone he had seemed to live, might be his cheif aim still; but it was

not so to the exclusion of every other, as it had been. There was great comfort in this, as regarded Edward himself, and so his mother said and felt; but Mabel was a little, a very little dissatisfied. She need not have been so very fearful of applying to him then—they might have had this consolation before. Lee Manor was not so all-absorbing to Edward as it had been; and Mabel sighed, travelled up to her own little chamber, looked towards that point of the compass where her early home was lying quiescent under its usurpation, thought over all her brother said, felt a little angry with him, wept a few hot tears, scolded herself for being selfish and unreasonable, and so came down again better pleased, and resolved to think it all right. At any rate, there was great comfort in knowing an effectual stop would now be put to Mr. Lockstone's pitiless persecutions of her father.

And there was no real reason for condemning Edward as a traitor to his boyhood's creed; even the feeling of sorrow, the lingering sentiment which Mabel could not banish with the others, would have departed could

she have seen and perfectly comprehended her brother's state of mind. The young man's love for his home, the birthright of himself and his forefathers, was just as vivid as ever—it was still the darling object of his life to redeem the beloved Manor, and make it their very own once again; and in the buoyancy of his young spirit, he clung to this hope yet, even after the sad tidings of its being finally given up to Stephen Lockstone had reached him. His travels, his new occupation, above all his association for the first time with many fresh and different minds, had matured his character and ripened his experience in these few months, as years passed in the old life at home would have failed to do. The passionate, unreasoning longing for personal opposition to Stephen Lockstone's machinations, the despairing boyish rebellion and resistance to the inevitable, was calmed into the man's cool forethought and calculating planning. He was as resolved as ever that if a man could accomplish it, Lee Manor should be their own again; but he knew that time, patience, and steady work were the only sure weapons

to fight the battle with—he had become reconciled to their adoption, and willing in the interim to make the best use of his own time and opportunities in winning knowledge, and even sharing enjoyment among scenes and objects not all so immediately connected with this chief aim of his young life, though chief aim it still remained. Well was it for Edward and all others that this was so, that his youthful wisdom, joined to his uncle's lessons, had shown him the reasonableness of such a course; and that the change and variety of his life had given him strength of spirit to adopt and persevere in it.

CHAPTER XI.

CHRISTMAS and the New Year had come and gone, passed by on the restless wings of that old compatriot of our mortal world, Time; and the Lockstone's moved and lived, thought and speculated, in the old halls and pleasant chambers of the Manor. Living in it was no longer a novelty; yet still the inhabitants scarcely looked at home there—that is, the master and mistress. The latter, depressed, listless, seemed more subdued, less able to take her own place in the household than ever—the strange large rooms, the new luxury of her life, had no charm for her. What little of a woman's happiness she had known since her girlhood had been lived through in the forsaken old house in the High Street —there her babies, her own then, had lain upon her bosom, clung to her knees. Here all was cold, desolate, telling only of the

hopeless dull present; and there was nothing even for her to do—she missed the homely housewifely cares belonging to the country attorney's wife; out of character—degrading, Sarah said, to the lady of Lee Manor.

For the lawyer, he was as moody, restless, and miserable as he well could be; so deep and absorbing were his fits of gloom and distraction, he even forgot sometimes to snub his unhappy wife; and Sarah herself, when she did attack him, which was not often just now, sometimes failed to rouse him. At last, partly through her proposal, partly, as it appeared, because living always in the Manor House was no longer endurable, Stephen Lockstone betook himself regularly to his own old den in Merestown. Daily he resorted thither; sometimes he would remain away a whole week; never were more than half a dozen of his waking hours passed in his grand new home, and in those he was so uneasy, so restless and excited, that it seemed doubtful, as Sarah had partly foreseen, whether he would long come there at all.

In Hester the removal had effected little

alteration, beyond, perchance, a little increase of indolence, if that were possible, and decided additions to her natural affectation. Mr. Geldfinder, being the most clever of all her devoted squires in ministering to her foibles and weaknesses, was becoming, perhaps, the most favoured among the suitors who found Lee Manor to the full as accessible as the High Street, and there seemed some probability that the wooing would end before long in marriage. Had the gentry of the neighbourhood come forward at once, as had been the secret conviction and eager hope of the family, it is possible that higher views might have been entertained for and by the co-heiress; but they had hitherto kept provokingly, determinedly aloof, and even Mr. Lockstone encouraged the present aspirant. If he did feel an interest himself in anything about Lee Manor and his family now, it was apparently that his daughter should marry at once.

As to Sarah, she was Sarah Lockstone, neither more nor less, whether in Merestown, High Street, or in Lee Manor; and yet, of all the family, she alone seemed to fit into the

new home and the new life, to become naturalized, or rather to appear a part of the place from the first. For awhile she let things alone, and watched the progress of affairs in her usual cold, amused, critical way; but at last she resumed her old habit, and commenced indirectly guiding her father's uncertain course.

"Do you ever happen to see your bailiff, sir?" she asked, one day; "or is he such a paragon among his fellows that he interprets your wishes unspoken, and carries them out regardless of his own interests?"

Mr. Lockstone started from one of his gloomy reveries, and changed colour like a guilty man, as he met his resolved daughter's unswerving eye fixed on him.

"Yes, of course—why not? What can you know about it, Sarah?"

"Oh! nothing, of course, only I was looking round the home farm yesterday, and I saw quite enough to make *me* remember the master's eye was the only one to find out the stag, and I chanced to hear that Tuffnell has had no orders from you since Christmas Eve."

"I—I have been busy, and it is all new work to us yet," returned Mr. Lockstone, helplessly. He was so changed, he seemed to succumb without a word, confess himself to blame without one attempt at justification."

"Indeed!" and Sarah's lofty eyebrows arched in high contempt—"it appeared to come quite naturally to you formerly when the Lees' old bailiff came regularly to Merestown for direction. Has the land undergone any curious geological change since your open occupation of it, or have the principles of agriculture altered? I was not aware of it."

He winced beneath the calm irony of her words. His head drooped, and he seemed to have absolutely lost the power to answer her at all. She looked down on him calmly, curiously, scarcely with contempt, and yet it was more with that feeling than any pity that she proceeded to relieve him from his pitiful perplexity, by suggesting a remedy to the uneasiness and falterings of his mind.

"Why should your living here make so much difference in your arrangements?" she

asked. "You choose to go to the office as sedulously as if your bread depended on it still—why not let Tuffnell meet you there, as usual?"

Mr. Lockstone looked eagerly up—a ray of comfort seemed about to visit his wretchedly unhinged mind; but before he could answer in words a shadow crossed his face, and his daughter saw the thought that brought it, and again relieved his embarrassment.

"No; there would be nothing strange in it, as you persist in your own daily visits to Merestown—why should not the bailiff give in his accounts on market days at the old office, as he used to do? You are so little at *home*"—she laid a stress on the word; "strangers may well fancy importunate business carries you over there—the winding up of your legal affairs, perhaps—before their transfer——"

"I tell you, Sarah, I am not."

"Nay, why expend so much needless breath? Don't *I* know as well as you that you never intend giving up those precious old haunts to anyone else? No. It would be

contamination, wouldn't it?—for one party, at least," she added, with a cruel, searching look, and the curled lip more mocking than ever.

Mr. Lockstone winced. Sarah had greatly relieved his mind, and he had been almost grateful to her a minute ago. Now he felt he had never so nearly hated her. Her eyes were on him still, and presently she gave a short, scarcely pleasant laugh; then she spoke in her ordinary tone, but her words sounded more like a command than a question.

"You will follow this plan?"

"Yes," he replied, sullenly—"it will suit me best, I think."

"Ah! I wonder the shadow of the old place did not suggest it to you. Whatever you allow yourself to become *here*, surely in his own den Lawyer Lockstone might find something of the *man* still!"

Her father winced again, and fidgeted towards the door.

"It is time I was going, Sarah—I cannot stop now."

Sarah looked at the timepiece.

"Indeed!—a quarter to nine yet. Ah! I understand; you are going round by the Home Farm to bid Tuffnell go to you to-day, and will be picked up there. An excellent plan. I congratulate you on originating an idea again."

Mr. Lockstone glanced up at her from beneath his bushy eyebrows, but she was looking intently at the ornaments on her watch-guard, which she was rearranging. Her whole attention appeared absorbed in this occupation. The expression on her face quite baffled him. Had she known he had never even remembered it was market-day—had only sought to escape *her*, and so mocked at him as usual, or were her words for once the genuine expression of her thoughts? It *might* be possible, and he drew a long, relieved breath in that hope, as he answered,

"Yes—no need to delay till next week."

"Not the least, and you need not trouble about your orders to the coachman. I am going in with you this morning, and will let him know myself."

"You!" faltered Mr. Lockstone, in dismayed astonishment.

"Yes—why not? Is it so very wonderful that I should share your close affection for the old house?"

"But what will you do all day?—there's nothing. You'll find it very dull, Sarah."

"Never mind, thank you—I have *my* business to attend to also; you need not concern yourself so paternally on my account."

Her scornful smile had more of bitterness than usual as she spoke, significantly adding—

"I am resolved to go."

Then it was no use to say any more—no use to try and defer the jaunt to the Home Farm, to hope for a reprieve in that matter of Tuffnell; and so the master of Lee Manor thought very ruefully as he slowly left the room with lingering steps and troubled brow. He *must* go. He *must* follow the course his clever, unyielding, terrible daughter had suggested. *She* would follow him in the carriage; she would know whether *he* had

followed the plan chalked out for him. Yes, there was no help for it, and he went.

Sarah watched him from the room, and, by-and-by, out of the side-door leading away through the shrubbery to the Home Farm—watched him with the usual scoffing smile at first; then, as he slowly disappeared behind the shrubs in the last visible turn of the winding path, she walked away from the window to the fire, and stood leaning with her elbow on the old carved mantelpiece, a slight frown contracting her broad white forehead, and a look of intense thought on her face; finally, as she at last quitted her resting-place, and passed out of the room to prepare for her drive, she murmured, half aloud,

"There is something more behind—something I do not know—I feel certain of it. Never mind; I will know yet, and see if there is really the least foundation for this childish weakness."

And then Sarah walked upstairs with her usual haughty mien, rang for her maid, and as the stable clock clanged nine, stood ready

equipped in the hall, at the same instant that the carriage drove rapidly to the door—the open carriage which took Mr. Lockstone daily into Merestown now. Her maid stood ready with the wraps, and the butler hurried forward in astonishment to open the door. She got in, allowed the obsequious servants to wrap her warmly up, and then, as footman and butler still stood waiting, said sharply,

"That will do—shut the door, if you please, and bid Drayson drive to the Home Farm."

She was obeyed, but the men stood watching her for a moment, in spite of the cold, as the carriage drove off, before retiring into the warm hall.

"She'd make a rare queen now, wouldn't she?" half-asked, half-affirmed the younger man, admiration and awe on his face.

Adamson, the well-trained butler, just fresh from the service of Lady Harpstone, and double his understrapper's age, shrugged his shoulders.

"Um—umph!—she's nearly the hand-

somest woman I ever saw, James, and I've seen a rare lot in my time; but I'd sooner have her for my queen than my daughter any day," and he turned into the house.

Not without reason had Mr. Lockstone shrank from visiting the Home Farm. True, the residents there, Tuffnell and his family, were his own creatures, in a manner installed there by him, not very long before the Lees had gone away—people honest and straightforward in their way. Mr. Lockstone thought honesty in a bailiff very desirable, but he preferred it in one not of the neighbourhood—in one who neither knew nor cared much about the *real* family of the Manor. The Home Farm, however, was frequently visited by others—those who came to see the bailiff on business, especially on market days—and as the master walked up to the gate, he saw his worst forebodings realized. He had dreaded to meet some of those tenants who looked on him as a usurper; and there, standing side by side with Tuffnell, he saw Reuben Hernshaw, the one man of all others whom he most disliked, tenant of the

best farm on the Manor estate, with a favourable lease, seven years of which had yet to run, but already, as he knew, eager to cancel that lease, even at a loss; anything rather than stay—unless compelled to do so—under the new dynasty. His light cart, with his eldest boy as driver, stood now near the gig, waiting for Mr. Tuffnell. The man advanced down the walk, and Tuffnell exclaimed—

"Here comes the master himself, Mr. Hernshaw, you had better speak to him on your little matter."

Mr. Hernshaw drew himself up stiffly. "No, thank you, Mr. Tuffnell, I've said my say to you, you'll do the best you can for me, and now I'm in haste to get to market;" and he hurried on, returning Mr. Lockstone's labouredly bland "good morning, Hernshaw," by the slightest of bows, and jumping into his cart, which, as his boy shook the reins, disappeared rapidly along the drive.

Tuffnell looked on at this scene with a half puzzled, half amused air, and after receiving Mr. Lockstone's directions as to meeting him at his office, said, "Hernshaw's been about his

lease again, sir. He'd better have spoken to you at once."

"What is it? why can't he rest now he's had his answer," was the impatient rejoinder.

"So I told him; but now he wants leave to underlet on certain conditions, sir;" and Tuffnell shrugged his shoulders. Mr. Lockstone muttered one of his favorite expletives.

"And that he shan't have; the man's a fool!"

"Some folks do like to quarrel with their own bread and butter," the bailiff replied reflectively; he was by no means sure his master did not, in another fashion from Hernshaw. Altogether, shrewd Northerner as he was, the general aspect of affairs as to Lee Manor estate, was a riddle to him just at present, and he was by no means clear which way his own feelings tended. People had a right to fortunes honestly come by. Ups and downs had ever been in life, and ever would be. It was a pity one man couldn't get rich without another's being made poor, certainly; but some always lost money, some always won it. Things must be taken as they were and made the best of. He was sorry for the Lees, the

women folk especially; but if that simple old man had chosen to fool away all he had, why, surely the man who'd got it, and done his best for him all along, too, was the right person to succeed him—some one must. Better he than a stranger. 'Twas heard to quarrel with a man for doing his best, because that best had won him fortune." So argued Mr. Tuffnell. His sympathies went certainly with the strong men, not with the weak. He had ever had a sovereign contempt for poor broken Mr. Lee; and now, since Mr. Lockstone had come to the Manor, *he* too seemed to be falling away from his strength of mind, and purpose. Was there some baneful influence in the house that worked such effect on its inmates?

CHAPTER XII.

MR. HERNSHAW'S haste to get to market appeared to have deserted him as he neared the Town. He fidgeted, took his watch in and out of his pocket, checked young Reuben's skilful, rapid driving more than once, dragged a big covered basket from under the seat, half raised the lid, pushed it back again, and altogether so demeaned himself as to occasion considerable surprise to his son.

"What's the matter, father?" asked that young gentleman at last, in the steady, straightforward fashion inherited from his usually self-possessed, sensible parent. Mr. Hernshaw started as though detected in some unlawful act, and his bronze cheek flushed a little. He looked first at his son, then at the sky, then at his horse, then down on the rough horsecloth over their knees in embarrassed silence, finally

meeting his boy's eye, he laughed, laughed his own frank hearty laugh, and recovering himself at one jump as it were, said,

"Well, Ben, I suppose I'm just a bit nervous this morning at my errand, that's just about the long and short of it, I take it; and wouldn't 'mother' scold me rarely for being such a ninny —but taking *them* a present, the likes of us. Besides, I can't bear going nigh that place, it just cuts my heart in two. I went once, and to see it, and think of them, it was near making a woman of me, Ben, and that's the truth. I'd as lief feel a big serpent crawling over me as meet Steve Lockstone, but I'm not sure that isn't better, one way, than going such a journey as this," and the honest farmer paused and heaved a huge sigh.

Reuben looked up at his father and smiled. His bright blue eyes were very pleasant to look into in their frank innocence, but he was rather too young to understand or enter into all the complication of feelings which had given rise to this speech. One part only he fully appreciated, as appeared from his reply.

"Steve Lockstone always looks as if he

deserved a good licking, and expected it, father; and shouldn't I like to be the one to give it him!"

Hernshaw laughed, and as they had now entered the suburbs of the town, and taken a turning leading quite away from the market-place, he began pulling out his basket again, and trying, as it seemed, to brace himself up to a certain point of courage for some dreaded encounter.

Not anything very formidable, people might think, who saw him five minutes after trudging up the narrow walk of No. 5, Newman's Buildings, the heavy basket on his arm, with a firm, heavy tread, though an unusually crimson face.

Deborah opened the door. Her face, which had something akin to the crab-apple in its first expression, cleared as she saw who it was.

"You, Mr. Hernshaw, no! Come in; we can't afford to turn well-known faces from the door now-a-days. Master is a-bed yet, of course, and the mistress is with him this morning, as it happens, but Miss Mabel—oh! you'll

not go and never see her!" as Mr. Hernshaw, growing redder and redder every minute was backing towards the door, after awkwardly thrusting his basket almost on Deborah's toes.

"I am going to market, Mrs. Deborah, you see—only the missus, she thought perhaps you didn't get quite such fat chickens or sweet butter in Merestown as we grow—" the honest farmer was confounding his butter with some idea of his wheat samples in his confusion; "so I made so bold—she sent—" not a word more could he utter, for there, looking at him through the half-opened parlour-door, was Mabel's sweet face, a little flushed, too, and a soft dew gathering in her violet eyes.

The good-hearted farmer snatched his hat from his head and dropped it. He would have turned and fled precipitately, but that Deborah, taking advantge of an ill-directed lurch to save his hat, had summarily shut the door.

Mabel came forward with outstretched hands.

"No, Mr. Hernshaw, Deborah is right;

you must not go without letting me thank you heartily for your kindness;" and, seeing he had not yet recovered from his confusion, she continued, smiling, "the market must wait a little longer for you still, while I hear how Mrs. Hernshaw and all your family are. It was so very good and thoughtful of her to think of sending us some of her capital butter, you must tell her how very kind we think it, and that we thank her very much, and you for bringing it. It is *so* pleasant to see a face from the old place!" she added, with a quiver in her voice she could not quite subdue, though she tried bravely.

The worthy farmer's honest face beamed with pleasure as she spoke, and though he had hardly ventured to give the warm squeeze he longed to bestow on the little white hand lying in his rough palm, he had held it there all the time, and now bowed over it, as he released it, with as much native grace and gallantry as one of the knights of Lee Manor himself might have shown centuries ago.

There was a good deal of the best spirit

the old feudal times, with none of the mischief of it, belonging to the feelings with which some of the tenants still regarded the Lee family, and Hernshaw stood foremost amongst these. When Mabel, as a lovely toddling child, had delighted to make voyages of discovery amid the treasures of Meadowlands Farm, she had been petted and delighted in as a little one, but at the same time, baby as she was, had been respected and held somewhat in awe as their liege lady, "A Lee." And now, in her fallen estate, she was still a Lee to him, worthy of all honour and reverence for her birth as for her misfortunes.

"I'm right glad you're not offended, Miss Mabel, though I might have known you wouldn't be, though it does seem out of the way, somehow—but there," he abruptly broke off, "I'll tell my missus, and she and I—we shall be so proud and pleased—she'll take more heed to her churn now than ever; and she's brave, thank you, Miss Mabel, and all on us, only——"

But again the frank, good-hearted fellow

broke off in embarrassment, and hurriedly anxiously asked for the Squire.

"Much the same, thank you, Mr. Hernshaw—better, indeed, lately, than we could have hoped. I will not ask you to wait and see him, though," she added, sorrowfully, "for I am afraid it would make him sad, not glad, as it does me, to see you, and know you don't quite forget us. His memory is not so good as it was, you know, and he is happier forgetting all about *home*. You won't mind?" she said, a little anxiously.

"Mind! Bless ye, Miss Mabel, no—I never thought to see you, let alone him—I wouldn't for the world. God bless him, though, and you too, and the lady, and the young lord—oh! Miss Mabel, will he *never* come to his rights?"

And poor Hernshaw forgot all his resolutions not to touch on the subject foremost in his thoughts, and broke forth in a torrent of abuse against Stephen Lockstone and his actions. His honest indignation was expressed in no measured terms, and it was grateful to poor Mabel to listen to it, though she blamed

herself all the time for feeling so uncharitably pleased. Do what she might, Mabel could not divest herself of the conviction that their once trusted and respected agent was a rogue. The idea had been slow in coming, often dislodged, often argued away, but had returned again and again, and now, at last, was so securely fixed, that there was small chance of its banishment henceforth, and all that tended to prove there was no injustice in harbouring it was becoming unconsciously welcome to the poor child.

Feebly she tried to check Hernshaw's outburst.

"Oh! Mr. Hernshaw. Perhaps it is wrong to blame Mr. Lockstone. Everything was legally done, it is said, and if—if we have lost everything, we must learn to bear it."

Mabel's cheeks were flushed, and tears stood in her eyes as she spoke. The sight recalled her honest but helpless champion to himself, to a remembrance of the cautions of his wife against alluding to the great grievance.

"Maybe they've learnt to put up with it a

bit better, Reuben," the good woman had said; "and it's no good bringing it all back fresh again, so if you do see any of 'em, don't say a word—they'll know how we feel without, and 'tisn't as if we could do any good—we can't. God knows the rights, and in His good time we may too—but don't bring it up to 'em again.

"And that's just what Iv'e gone and done in my blunder-headed fashion," thought the poor man with exceeding contrition. "'Twas all seeing that toad, Steve Lockstone, at Tuffnell's. I'd heard he didn't go nigh the Home Farm now, or I wouldn't have gone, I'm very sure."

And full of these thoughts, and many like them, he stammered still more in the words of apology he was trying to get out to Mabel. She saw his confusion, and partly guessing its cause, interposed with farther messages of thanks to Mrs. Hernshaw, and shaking hands once more, retreated under cover of Deborah's reappearance with the basket emptied of its contents.

As she let him out, Deborah asked with a peculiar intonation,

"Are you going to stop at Meadowlands now, Mr. Hernshaw?"

He started. Had Deborah been reading his inmost thoughts at that instant, she could hardly have asked a more pertinent question. The farmer stared at her, before answering with vigorous emphasis,

"Not one moment longer than I can help, Mrs. Deborah, you may be sure of that—nor so long if there's any way of preventing it with their lawyering devilry," with which not very logical addition he bid Deborah good-bye, and hurried down the path and into his cart, feeling very sore all the time in the consciousness that he *was* a tenant of Steve Lockstone's. Yes, that man was his landlord, it was only too true. A fact nothing could alter at the moment. That ever it should be so, and the honest farmer writhed at the thought as in corporal pain. Oh! to get rid of that lease at any cost—yes, any, he'd— and then his eye fell on Reuben, and his face changed and fell. Ah! yes, at any cost if he and his wife had been *alone*—but there were six children!

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. LOCKSTONE'S open carriage swept up to the gate leading into Tuffnell's little garden as that individual was still pondering this one problem of his present life, and while his master had yet the angry look upon his face called up by the repetition of the Hernshaw business. Sarah scanned both men fixedly, returned the bailiff's low bow with a slight haughty inclination of her handsome head, and then bestowed her whole attention to her father as he hastened into the carriage, the old uncertain expression returning on his face.

"Well, sir, you and your bailiff might have sat for an exact representation of the cur and the Newfoundland exemplified in the human race," she observed, as they bowled rapidly

away over the hard, smooth road. "May I ask what had gone wrong?"

Not if her father could have prevented it, certainly! But he could not, any more than he could refrain from answering her. Her mastery over him was too complete, and she was soon in full possession of all that had transpired.

"I wish I'd not gone near," ended Mr. Lockstone querulously; "it was all your doing, Sarah, and I could have sent just as well."

Sarah took the trouble to sit quite upright in the carriage for half a minute after this speech, during which she looked at him with that cold, pitiless stare of contempt he knew so well and dreaded so thoroughly. He shrank back farther into his own corner, and, her gaze accomplished, she too fell back again, quickly observing,

"Let the man go—what does it matter? Scores of willing tenants would jump at Meadowlands."

"No, no, Sarah, I can't," Mr. Lockstone exclaimed vehemently, and utterly regardless for the moment of his daughter's scorn. "He

is a first rate farmer, and his family have been on the land from generation to generation."

"Ah! I have always understood that was the case with the Lees themselves, yet you did not think it so impossible for them to be replaced."

"How can you talk like that, girl?" and Mr. Lockstone showed some of his old spirit, and used one or two of his favourite oaths. "It's no good talking folly; I've set my heart on keeping this fellow. He *shall* stay."

Sarah paused a minute before replying.

"Well, if that's your resolve, to be carried out with or without reason, let it be; but understand *I* consider you are mistaken."

"There are few enough of the old people left now, and—and don't you see how it would look if they *all* went; it's very few I can keep, but Hernshaw's one. He can't afford the money I'd make it cost him to get his whim, and I'll keep him, I tell you, willingly or not."

"*Your* whim versus his, in short, and you win the day. I don't see it as you do; indeed, I think the better plan would be the whole-

sale clearing of the estate, as I have told you before; still, I don't know that it is a matter of vital importance either way, only let me counsel you—keep your temper in such affairs. Be as firm as you like, if you have any power of firmness left, but don't show your feelings on it—not even to Tuffnell. And, I have intended saying it long, so it may as well follow that. Leave off swearing at me—at any of us, when the servants are by. It has not the ring of the true metal, and they know it. Remember," and uttering the last word with exceeding significance, Sarah relapsed into silence to the great relief of her father. He had dreaded a much greater amount of opposition—a determination in the opposite direction equally superior to his own, and then—why, he must have yielded; at any rate he would have yielded as in other things, and he cared very much about this. To keep Hernshaw, in spite of the man's dislike of him and love of the Lees, gratified his vindictive spirit; besides that he believed his own view the better one, and wished to act upon it.

Sarah was a wonderful *woman*, no doubt.

Her judgment and penetration were singular. In most things she was right—but in this, no. Perhaps she felt she was not so sure of her ground here, and that was why she didn't insist on it. Greatly comforted, Mr. Lockstone began to recover himself as they neared Merestown, to look about in the old sharpway, to be the astute, self-possessed lawyer again, instead of the uncertain, frightened-looking Squire of Lee Manor.

They were already close upon the suburbs when a sudden involuntary movement of her father's—a start and shiver that shook the whole carriage—roused Sarah from a reverie into which she had fallen, and caused her to look quickly, first at him—and she saw he had turned lividly pale and was staring fixedly as at an apparition—then at the road, on which his eyes were bent. Standing there, transfixed, too, apparently, but with intense astonishment as it seemed, stood a shabby, wretched, dirty-looking man. A suit of threadbare, rusty black, with ill-fastened rents here and there, gave him a more deplorable air than had his body been clothed in commoner stuff; a bat-

out of the carriage and entered his office. She, too, descended, but more slowly. Her father had seemed glad to escape, and hurried off as soon as the carriage stopped.

She gave an order or two to the servants, spoke to Rachel, who had been left in charge of the High Street premises since the family flitting, and then passed slowly on into the old sitting room. There it was, just the same as ever, the long, common-looking table with its covering of dust, the hard chairs and comfortless sofa, the wide fireplace, the deep sombre-looking oak window-seats, the narrow-paned windows themselves. How familiar it all was, and yet how different from the Manor House. Sarah sat down in her old favourite seat, declined Rachel's offers of fire and refreshment, and showed so plainly her impatience of that person's company, that Rachel, albeit somewhat tired of her solitary reign in the grim old house and very anxious for news from the Manor, quickly took herself off in no very amiable frame of mind towards Sarah.

As a rule she liked her the best of the two

girls she had watched grow up to womanhood, but there were times when she regarded her with something of the wonder—and, but for a naturally braver spirit, it might have been the fear, too—that Mr. Lockstone entertained for her, and she knew that Sarah's mood now was such that, for her own peace, she had best restrain her curiosity and leave her alone.

Alone Sarah sat for many a long hour, feeling nothing of the sharp cold, wrapped in her warm comfortable furs, noting little and realizing nothing of what was going on without in the familiar street. Deep in her own thoughts she sat perfectly still and motionless, but for a mechanical movement of her hands now and then as she passed them over each other; her eyes even were quiet and fixed, but her brain was very, very busy.

So she remained till the old clocks in Merestown began chiming out the hour—two o'clock. She had been there four hours then! One of the old scornful smiles flitted over her face for a moment as she thought this—scorn of herself; then she rose, threw away her abstraction,

and became once more the watchful, attentive actor in the present. First she gave a rapid, searching glance up and down the street, then took a survey of herself in the small old-fashioned oval mirror that hung over the chimney piece, finally opened the door and passed noiselessly down the passage, and beyond, into old Rachel's precincts. She found that personage in no very amiable frame of mind, and quite able to show it even to Miss Sarah.

But Sarah had expected and was prepared for this, so she began by saying she felt very hungry, could Rachel find her some bread and butter, and then, while eating it, volunteered scraps of news as to Lee Manor and her mother and sister, till old Rachel condescended to ask questions again, and at last, completely mollified, entered heart and soul into a gossip of the sort she most delighted in. This had lasted an hour when Sarah began a few questions on her own account, as to how Rachel got on in the old house, how many visitors she had, and so on, till she worked her way round to what she really wished to ascertain, namely, who had

been with her father on this day, as she expected Rachel was perfectly able to answer, though the people *had* gone to the office door.

"Well, not many; one or two of the old lot that allus come, and Mr Tuffnell, he came a good bit ago and was only just gone when you come down, I see him as I was upstairs tidying your room a bit."

"Ah! that's right, Rachel," Sarah answered, after a hardly perceptible pause wherein she had digested the first news. "I was just going to ask if I could go up there; I left a few things behind, and I want to look at them. Do you know, Rachel, I think I shall come in here sometimes with my father. It will be an amusement, you know, something to do."

Rachel looked curiously, furtively up in her young mistress's face. She, too, had often thought what a man—a lawyer—Sarah Lockstone would have made, now she only said,

"Very well. Your room'll be ready for you."

Sarah went upstairs. Presently she called Rachel, who had gone up too, into her own room.

"I am going out for a stroll, Rachel, to look at some of the places we used to go to when we were children; but I don't care for people's knowing me, you see, it wouldn't do. Am I plain enough dressed, do you think?"

Rachel thought she was, though she knew well enough in her heart that her opinion in this matter would not weigh much with the beautiful, imperious woman who demanded it. Very handsome she looked now, though all her beautiful rich furs and her costly bonnet and mantle had been discarded. A dark skirt, a large plain cloak which completely enveloped her, and a close fitting black bonnet now formed her sole adornments; but there was a light and spirit in her eyes, brightened by the colour in her cheek, which was sometimes lacking to her stately beauty.

"When you see my father, Rachel, tell him I have gone out, and shall not be ready to go home till half-past five; and now give me the latch key, and in an hour put up the lock so that I can slip in quietly. Good-bye," and with an unusually gracious smile Sarah took the proffered key and went down.

Rachel hastened after her to open the door. Sarah passed out, and as she did so dropped a thick veil over her face. No one who met her could recognise her in the least. None would dream the swiftly-moving dark figure, so plainly, not to say commonly, dressed, could be one of the Miss Lockstones of Lee Manor.

But as she neared the office door Sarah stopped, and presently stooped down to disentangle her dress, caught apparently in the railings. From the time it took to free, it must have become curiously embarrassed. She passed on at the same moment that the office door closed on a man slinking into it. The winter's afternoon was very heavy, and here in Merestown it was already nearly dark, but Sarah felt almost certain she had recognized that shabby dress and slouching gait when she first descried its approach down the ill-lighted street. Now she was quite so; and glancing up to the windows above was also satisfied that Rachel had seen the new comer too. She smiled to herself more scornfully than usual, then went rapidly on.

CHAPTER XIV.

MABEL turned into the little sitting-room of No. 5, Newman's Buildings after her farewell to honest Reuben Hernshaw. Why did it look so small, so mean, so bare, so altogether worse than it had done when she left it barely ten minutes ago? Was it the tears in her eyes, now that she was alone fast welling over and down her soft young cheek? or was it the memory of that other room, those rooms which the good farmer's visit and words had brought so vividly before her? Mabel herself scarcely knew, she was only conscious of a weight of grief and regret, and an intensity of sorrow at their changed estate such as she had hardly felt before, even at the first—a mourning so deep for the sad fate of those she so dearly loved that her heart felt breaking; and sinking down in a corner of the little square room she gave way to the passion of tears which

nature sent for her relief. Had Deborah been a whit less occupied with the thoughts her own talk with the farmer had set busily to work, she would surely have heard some of the sobs which were shaking poor Mabel's frame. As it was, she passed the parlour door lost to all outward things, and was soon downstairs occupied with her work again. Possibly it was better so.

By and by Mabel's grief exhausted itself, and as she roused herself up and began smoothing her hair and trying to remove all traces of her emotion, she began also to feel a little ashamed of her indulgence in it. She thought she had grown so brave, so submissive, and resigned. Was the simple visit of one of the old tenants to overthrow it all? And then her thoughts flew away to Meadowlands, to the old days when she and Edward were children, and when one of their greatest treats was a visit to that pretty, ever busy farm.

How well she remembered the couple of miles of bridle road through which they went to it, Dorothy and Susan walking, she and

Edward riding their dear old Shetland, Tawney, by turns.

How beautiful the Park glade was which led out on the common, and how they used to enjoy a scamper across that corner of it which they had to traverse before entering the green lane whither the way next led them. She could smell the golden furze, and see the tall waving bracken and pretty purple heath now, and the lane with its steep picturesque banks and roof of hazel arches quite meeting overhead in most places, and the little gurgling brook, so bright and sparkling, with one narrow plank by way of a bridge. How often Dorothy had stood on it and scolded while she or Edward would keep Tawney pawing in the water; they liked to see the glittering drops showering round so much, and felt quite sure neither Dorothy nor Susan would walk into the water after them.

How naughty and how happy they were!—and then the fields at the end of the lane, which were reached some five minutes after passing the stream—those delightful fields, with always something fresh in them—now the pretty herd of red and white and dappled

cows; now some young colts, which occasioned Dorothy to insist on holding Tawney's bridle, and frightened Susan into leaving off that ceaseless chatter of hers; now some calves of different ages and sizes, each so charming they changed their minds half a dozen times at least before the field was crossed, as to whether the "two year old," with its budding horns, or the little meek-looking, just-weaned Alderney was their favourite; then a flock of sheep would dot the meadow over with their white snowy fleeces; and sometimes there were some lambs, some dear little long-tailed lambs; and then, as they neared the farm, there would be stray cocks and hens, and ducks and geese, and yellow little lumps of goslings, and the turkey-cock, with his fierce strut and gobble-gobble.

Oh! how happy she and Edward had been then!—how happy! And then she went on thinking of their welcome at the farm itself. How Reuben Hernshaw in person, if at home, would lift them from Tawney's back and lead them into the best parlour, redolent of lavender and dried rose-leaves, and shout to his comely

young wife that missey and the "young lord" were come, and she would bustle in with her rosy cheeks and kindly smile and insist on taking Mabel's hat off, while she ate as much cake and strawberries and cream as Dorothy could be prevailed on to allow; and then on went the hat again, and away they flew after Mr. Hernshaw into the farm-yard, the stables, the cow-house, the very pig-sties—each and all had charms for the children; and, crowning delight of all, they watched the cows milked, and the little calves let in to their lowing mothers; the sole drawback to which intense excitement was the knowledge that tea, tea in the best parlour, and Mrs. Hernshaw in her best cap, filling their plates with *such* bread and butter, and *such* biscuits, would follow immediately upon it. Finally Dorothy would say they must go, go at once, and there would only be time, during the half hour, at least, that her last words to Mrs. Hernshaw took to say, for just one scamper up and down and round the old-fashioned grass paths and espalier-lined walks of the garden, and then the day, the delight-

ful day was over—only, just as they were really starting, Mrs. Hernshaw would rush wildly out, and stuff into Mabel's hands a huge nosegay of Sweet Williams, and gilly flowers, and "old man's love," so sweet and so magnificently gaudy—far superior to any old Jelly, their own head-gardener, ever gathered for her. So Mabel used to think.

Ah! those days; and the added joys when young Reuben was born, and there was "baby" to look at in the cradle, and now and then to hold in her lap, as she sat on the floor, Dorothy or Mrs. Hernshaw being always close by. Those visits were the gala days of their quiet, secluded childhood. Meadowlands was their child's paradise, possessing far superior charms, in their young eyes, to those of the stately Manor House, beautiful as that and its grounds really were, precious, only too precious, as they had since become. But there was little live stock about the Manor House itself; and with the home farm they had never been familiar. Dorothy considerd it dangerously near, and, besides, did not admire

its occupant, who even then was of Mr. Lockstone's choosing.

From the sweet memories of childhood and early youth, Mabel went on to think of the later days, of the gradual change for the worse in her father, of Stephen Lockstone's altered manner, of many little incidents unheeded at the time, but now returning on her with strange vividness and new meaning. Was there some secret about that man's possession of their home? Had it been indeed honestly earned by him—really, if weakly lost by her father; or was he the knave she had begun to think him, and yet they powerless to prove it and to right themselves?

Mabel pondered this problem long and painfully, and she was still completely absorbed in its study, and utterly lost to all present outward things, when a hand was laid on her shoulder, and she gave a violent, half-frightened start, as she looked up to find Dr. Armsdaile's kind face looking down on her.

"What, I really frightened you, my dear? I am sorry for that, but I began to fancy the bad fairy's old spell revived again, and

that it had taken effect on you. Dorothy and I made noise enough together as I came in, and yet here you were, statue-like and motionless. What is it?" he added, more anxiously, as he saw the traces of her late weeping-fit, and watched the troubled changes through which the sweet face passed to regain its wonted calm.

"Nothing—at least nothing new. Only I was very foolish. Mr. Hernshaw has been here, bringing us delicacies from dear old Meadowlands, and—and I began to think about it—and all—and I was very naughty, doctor; scold me, it will do me good," and she looked up with a gentle smile.

"Well, you were very naughty, and extremely foolish; but as you know your fault, and ask for their deserts, why, I'll let you off this time—only beware of the next!" and he shook his finger at her threateningly, and then went on. "Your father not down yet, Dorothy tells me—fancies his cold worse, a sure sign it is better, my dear, so don't look auxious. A cold doesn't really affect him, and helps to occupy his thoughts. I shall be

rather sorry when even he must acknowledge it well. I'm going up to see him presently, and while I am there you'll get ready to come with me as far as the Rectory. Mrs. Ravenshaw is laid up with a cold, too—really ill, and I promised you should have an hour's chat with her. I'm going on to Castle Neville, and will pick you up as I come back. There, don't look scared, you'll be home in plenty of time for tea, and I'll make it all right upstairs."

So ran on the good but imperative doctor, and Mabel was really smiling before he had done. He had divined her thoughts so accurately, answered them so completely, unspoken though they were, and put aside her objections so entirely, yet so quietly, she could not but be amused. To leaving her father even for a few hours she would, however, have demurred in spite of all this, had not the news of her kind old friend's illness weighed greatly in the opposite scale. She thought a little, and then, as the doctor was going upstairs, came out too, saying anxiously,

"You think I may go?"

"To be sure! You conceited little puss, do you think they can't live five hours, ay, or a hundred, without you?" and patting her on the shoulder as when she was a child, he turned into Mr. Lee's room, and Mabel proceeded on her way to dress for her drive.

When she was ready she went to say good-bye to her father, who was sitting wrapped up in his easy chair by the fire, Dr. Armsdaile close to him, her mother opposite. He looked up as she came in, and taking her hand fondly, said,

"Going to see Mrs. Ravenshaw, Mabel? Yes, that's right; and get them to send her something nice, Mabel, won't you? Speak to Mrs. Ashton about it. She's ill, you know. What is it? Yes, a cold—a nasty cold like mine. Poor thing!—poor thing!" and he fondled his daughter's hand all the time he spoke.

She only answered by a kiss, somehow her heart was too full that morning to venture on answering a speech which showed how entirely her father failed to realize their changed estate.

Dr. Armsdaile watched her as they drove along through the keen, bracing air, and inwardly resolved his feeble old patient must and should learn to bear Mabel's absence, not only once in a way, but for some hours each day, if he could so manage.

"I thought something was to be done as to our excellent friend Mr. Lockstone?" he observed by-and-by, as they were nearing the Rectory.

"Yes, Edward said so, but you see he answered our letter directly, and there was no time for the other to be sent by that ship, I believe. No doubt we shall hear about it before very long, in a little more than another month, I should think."

"Ah! that's right," and as he spoke the carriage stopped at the Rectory door.

It was growing dusk when Mabel once more entered No. 5, Newman's Buildings. The doctor had been detained longer than he anticipated, and could not come in again himself. She said good-bye as he handed her out, and as she passed hurriedly in at the gate her dress brushed against that of another person

who was at the same instant passing into the next house. She glanced up a little surprised, for No. 4 was empty, and had been so, rather to her relief, ever since they themselves had inhabited the row. The house looked grimy and desolate enough, so did the little slip of ground with heaps of rubbish and of bricks, even yet left about; still, even that was preferable, poor Mable thought, to having neighbours—neighbours such as Newman's Buildings were likely to afford them.

She now turned to see if the woman was going to look at the house; she might be, preparatory to becoming that dreaded neighbour herself; but no, there was no sign of her, though surely she *did* pass through the gate. Once more Mabel looked round, then, concluding herself mistaken, and that she had really passed on, hastened up to the door, which Dorothy was already holding open for her. As Mabel came close she saw the faithful servant was disturbed, and before she could speak Dorothy burst forth,

"Oh! Miss Mabel, I am glad you've come, I'll not do it again when you're out; if there's

a peck of dust under it—rubbishing thing," she added *sotto voce*, as a little relief to the outraged feelings her kind heart forbade her in this instance to display otherwise.

"Oh! Dorothy, what is it?" cried poor Mabel, breathlessly.

"Not much, miss. Nothing at all to most folks. There, darling, don't look like that, it'll be all right now you've come. I've not had the chance of doing the room out—little closet of a place as it is—not as should be, you see, since we came, so to-day, as he chose to stay up to dinner, and madam wouldn't leave him, why, I set to work, after you went, and cleaned it thoroughly, that's all."

"But," said Mabel, still mystified and hesitating, with her hand on the door, "I don't see——"

"Why, the cabinet, dear. It's quite true I did move it—pushed it out of the place altogether, for the matter of that—but I thought I'd put it back just in the exact spot, ay, to a hair's breadth, I could swear I did, after the pains I took," and tears of vexation stood in poor Dorothy's eyes.

"And papa found out it had——"

"Went up to it directly, dear, and will have it some one's been at it. To think of such a fuss being made over it, even if it is an inch or so out of place," concluded Dorothy, in her despair.

"Never mind, Dorothy, I'll see if I can't make it all right," and Mabel went in at last.

Poor old Mr. Lee was standing—a most unusual thing for him—close by his jealously-guarded treasure, leaning on it, fumbling about it, and ever and again muttering almost incoherent lamentations, piteous assurances that "someone had touched it—someone had indeed;" and even the sight of his daughter, as she came eagerly towards him, failed to divert his attention at once. She had to pass her arm round his, and kiss his pale cheek again and again before he would turn to her. At last he did, but it was only to repeat the same cry even more piteously than before,

"Mabel, someone's touched it—they have indeed!"

"Yes, papa, dear. Dorothy's been dusting it, you know—see, it's quite clean now,"

and Mabel laid her little white hand on the cabinet, and then held up her fingers for her father's inspection.

The old man looked at them curiously. The idea was a new one, but simple enough for him to grasp, though neither his wife nor Dorothy had ventured to suggest it. Fearing to complicate matters, they had confined themselves to assurances that no one had been in the room. After the grave inspection of Mabel's pretty fingers, he again looked suspiciously at the cabinet, passing his own hand all over the top again and again, muttering, "Dusting—dusting."

Then he turned once more to his child, and looking anxiously in her face, demanded,

"Are you sure, Mabel?—quite sure?"

"Yes, dear papa, quite certain—look how nice and clean it is, and everything else; besides, she has cleaned it all so nicely," and Mabel glanced round the room, hoping to turn his attention elsewhere.

But in vain. His look followed hers, it is true, but he was evidently not thinking of what he saw, and soon his eyes were again

riveted on the cabinet,. and he once more began painfully, laboriously, to pass his hand over every part of it, peering round every now and then as he did so, with a cautious, alarmed look, as if fearful of his proceedings being observed.

. Mabel watched him with a troubled mind. It was so new to see such an expression on that placid, vacant face, and she began to regret her having been prevailed on to leave him, and to fear she might fail to quiet him as soon as she had hoped. Her quick eye had detected that the cabinet was really some inch or so out of its usual place, and taking advantage of one of those furtive glances of her father's, she gently pushed it into position. The movement escaped him, and had a most happy result, for when he once more paused to observe his treasure, his face cleared. He saw it was all right now, and began to forget he had discovered it otherwise on first coming down.

"You are quite sure, Mabel?—quite sure?" he once again repeated; and on her answering assurance sank quietly down in his chair,

very tired and languid, but rousing once to whisper, as he pointed to this day's fruitful source of trouble, "We must take care, Mabel—you know, great care—no one must get at it—*he* must not," glancing timidly round; and then he listened to her talk on other matters, as she gradually drew away his thoughts to Mrs. Ravenshaw, the messages she had sent, how bad was her cold, and so forth, till he had quite forgotten the cabinet's displacement and all his trouble over it.

Then Dorothy came in with the tea and lamp, and Mabel went herself to the window to draw the curtains. As she was about to pull the second, she started with an uncomfortable feeling of being watched, and looked hastily out into the dusk; but the little garden was deserted, and the line of wall on either side apparently unbroken in its blankness.

CHAPTER XV.

MERESTOWN was as yet innocent of gas—indeed, that brilliant friend of shopkeepers and troublesome enemy of burglars was hardly established in London, and country towns were still debating, very hotly sometimes, the chances of the new and wonderful light turning out a failure or success, not dreaming of attempting its adoption So the streets of Merestown, those that were lighted at all, were still illuminated by the old-fashioned oil and wick, whose feeble rays served rather to make darkness more visible beyond the little circle of their own immediate neighbourhood, than to really light the town.

Through its dim streets sped Sarah Lockstone, taking a very devious way to her desired goal; for she wished to avoid being watched, should she by chance be recognised, and had besides a strong inclination to pass

certain houses—houses whose inhabitants she knew. Possibly, probably she should see nothing but the bare walls, and, it might be, a lighted window or two; but there was a chance she might see more—if not, no matter; but she had begun to have a curious wonder within her inmost soul, whether other households in the privacy of home resembled theirs in any way. Should she find as much food for her satire in the heads of other families as in her own? What was jovial Mr. Turner like, for example, the father of one of Hester's many suitors?—was he the serene, rather loud, but good-natured social being in his own dining-room as in other people's?—or did he swear at his rosy little wife and try to tyrannize over his children?

So wondering, Sarah turned into the very street where their house stood, and as she did so, ran straight against Mr. Geldfinder, who was walking as fast as herself in the opposite direction. Both paused. Sarah to see if she was recognised, Mr. Geldfinder to see who had interrupted his progress. One glance was apparently sufficient—it was only some com-

mon person, and with an impatient "Can't you make use of your eyes, woman?" he passed on.

Sarah looked after him amused. Ah! he could be very different then from the suave, obedient attendant on Hester's lightest word —she had thought so before; well, it was Hester's concern, not hers, certainly. Mr. Geldfinder interested her in no way; and though it was satisfactory to know how truly she had judged him, she had felt too little doubt on the matter to be conscious of much excitement at the certainty. He was soon out of her thoughts, and she standing by the Turners' house, or, rather, under the shadow of the old-fashioned porch above the door.

Ah! the blind was not drawn yet, and everybody was there except the master of the family. Even young Turner, with the Benjamin of the family on his knee, a little thing of some three years old, now stuffing its mouth with the sweets "Broser Willie" had brought home. "Umph! Hester's made her usual mistake," was Sarah's secret comment as she noticed this, and shrugged her shoulders scornfully.

Mrs. Turner? Yes, there, half-asleep, of course, in the arm-chair, in spite of a vigorous dispute going on between the two younger girls close at her elbow. Poor Mrs. Turner! she was certainly idle, there was no doubt about it, and gave herself very little trouble in her efforts to conquer the *embonpoint* over whose approach she occasionally lamented. The eldest daughter was knitting busily between her favourite elder brother and two lads home from the day-school, who on their knees on the rug were trying to catch what little light the fire gave on the to-morrow's lessons they were conning.

It was a pretty domestic picture of an English home of the middle class, speaking to the best feelings of our nature, but it stirred no tender depths in Sarah's heart, or, if it did, it was unknown to herself; she took it all in with a keen, rapid glance, even to the distracted, not quite happy expression on young Turner's face, and then she gave the old smile, with threefold intensity of bitterness, but there was no soft light in her eye, rather a glitter of scorn as she muttered half-aloud,

"Ah! you're beginning to feel the game's lost. Well, she could sleep in your easy chair as well as your mother, no doubt; so perhaps you are right to grieve."

As she spoke the door of the parlour opened —opened so noisily she heard it where she stood—and Mr. Turner appeared on the threshold—no further, he had not time. His very turning of the handle had been recognized, and the small baby thing had scrambled off the young man's knee and was clasping his father's as the door opened, the little girls were clinging to his arms, the boys had flung aside their books, his wife received him with a welcoming smile and a happy light in her eye, the eldest son hastened to push his father's chair to the fire, and the daughter laid down the sock she was knitting him to stir that fire into the bright blaze she knew he loved. Sarah could not hear the cordial words he had for all his family, but she saw their greeting, and the genial smile on his face, and as she turned away at the same moment that "Willie" drew the blind down

she felt all doubts at rest for ever. There was truth in that home at least!

What should she find in the other? That was now her one absorbing thought as she sped faster and faster along; she had lingered on her way for more minutes than she had intended, and began to fear she might be too late for her next inspection; but no, it would be lighter in the outskirts, day lingered longer there; and on she hurried, very curious now, and something excited. She had never yet seen those on whom she now hoped to look—never, not even as a child, if her memory did not play her false, and it was not given to do that, she thought, with exultation. Hester had once seen them, she believed, long ago, on one of their rare visits to the town, but she never. They had very rarely driven in like the other county families, and latterly had never come at all. What were they like?

The old man was a fool, of course. The wife vulgar, she supposed, not so ladylike as her own mother even. The girl haughty, stately, and proud. She had heard of her as a true Lee, and at the selfsame instant

Sarah brushed against a slight girlish form just then alighting from a quiet-looking brougham.

It startled her for once, she had been so lost in her own thoughts she was not even conscious that she had already reached her destination; but she was mistress of the position in an instant, and had turned into the deserted plot of ground in front of No. 4, Newman's Buildings before Mabel had opened their own little gate, and was watching her intently from behind a friendly rubbish-heap before she had turned to see what could have become of her.

So that was Miss Lee, was it? She heard Dr. Armsdaile's farewell shout, and thus her first suspicion became certainty. Miss Lee, her predecessor in those long galleries and stately halls of Lee Manor. By the way, it must be called *Lee* Manor no more. She made a mental note to that effect, and determined to speak to her father on it as they drove home. What a slight, graceful girl! Pretty, people would call her, she supposed—a gentle beauty like Hester's in character;

only——and there handsome Sarah Lockstone made a deep pause, and looked with greater intentness on the pure, fair face advancing up the walk.

Ah! no she was not simply the mindless pink and white likeness of Hester. Her beauty, if as delicate, was of a higher order, there was intellect in that face, and—and—well, birth, perhaps. Of course it was the haughtiness for which she had looked, only not exactly in that form, and Sarah strained her eyes after the retreating figure, and finally left her hiding-place and followed it till she stood with only the slight partition wall between them, very close to the open door—so close that she heard the strange greeting of Dorothy to her young mistress, and lost for the moment every other feeling in that of intense curiosity. She held her breath to listen, but very needlessly; the cold evening air was very still, Dorothy's voice by no means even so low as usual in her excitement, and every word came clear and distinct to her ear, except one or two of Mabel's as she advanced further into the passage.

Dorothy had left the door open during the colloquy, and did not shut it till Mabel opened that of the parlour. No sooner had she done so than Sarah rapidly shifted her position so as to command a full view of the one window. Luck befriended her here. As in the former case, the window was uncurtained, the fire-light brighter, and she could see quite plainly that part of the room where the cabinet stood.

How fixedly did she gaze, and with what absorbing interest watch every movement of father and daughter. Her own face would have been a study, and a strange one, while she did so, so many changes passed over its usually immovable calmness of expression. She lost no gesture, however slight, of those within, no variation in their countenances, and not even to look at Mrs. Lee, where she sat, helpless, troubled, and anxious near the fire, did she remove her eyes from father and daughter till the last had subsided for some minutes into his chair, and the vacant look once more taken possession of his face. Oh! that she could hear as well as see, but that was impossible, so she strained her eyes to

their utmost tension in her anxiety not to let one movement, one look escape. When she felt the scene was over, she gave one sigh of relief, and then for the first time took note of gentle Mrs. Lee. She recognised the unmistakable though very quiet gentlewoman at once, and then immediately her earnest gaze returned to Mabel, and was not removed again till the change on Mabel's face, as she was drawing the curtains, showed that she was conscious of the curious inspection. Then Sarah dipped for an instant below the wall, the next, with one glance which showed that Mabel was gone, and the window completely draped, she was on her way back into the town, more visibly excited than she had ever been in her life.

She was herself perfectly conscious of this, and also, which was worse, of the real stir within, the unusual thoughts and feelings surging up and oversetting that equable calm to which she owed so much of the power over others which she so greatly valued. She was angry with her unusual weakness, and strove hard to regain her composure, walking faster than ever as she did so; partly because con-

scious she was late, partly that fierce bodily exertion might quiet the excitement astir within her mind.

By the time she had reached the entrance to High Street she had succeeded, and it was the ordinary cold, calm Sarah Lockstone, only with a brighter glitter than usual, it might be, in her handsome eyes, that glided softly into their old home, dropped the lock behind her, and hastening upstairs found Rachel standing ready at her door, candle in hand.

"Thank you, Rachel. I am afraid I am late, but really it is more amusing than I expected, I find, and no one knew me—Mr. Geldfinder even ran quite against me at the corner of Craven Street, and had no idea who it was. Has my father been waiting long?"

"Not at all, Miss Sarah. At least, he's not asked for you—indeed, he's never come out of the office yet, as I've heard. Someone came in just as you went, and I don't think he's been gone very long. I know he didn't go out with the clerk."

"Oh! well, that's all right. Just help me on with this cloak, Rachel, will you?

There now, I am quite ready—it's not worth while going down till the carriage comes, I think. We'll stay up here. Who was the person, do you know, Rachel?" she added, suddenly turning her eyes full on Rachel's.

But that elderly domestic was by no means embarrassed by their gaze, nor did her own fall beneath it. She was used to "Miss Sarah," and though she admired her, was no whit afraid of her on such occasions as these; and perhaps this was why Sarah treated her with rather more consideration than she ever did anybody else. Rachel would not tempt her into an outburst of wrath by interfering with her reserved moods; but in a talk she knew her own value, and that of her information, and could hold her own.

"I'm not sure that I do, Miss Sarah—it was very dusk, as you saw yourself, and I hadn't a very good chance to look at him, but I've a fancy I knew his cut, though if it is him, I've never set eyes on him for years."

Rachel paused, there was a strange faltering in her voice at the last words. It was

odd, the sight of him, though it had startled her at the moment, had not so vividly recalled what her own words had now done—this man's connection with the one bright spot in her memory, the one brief happiness of a very lonely, somewhat hard life.

Sarah was surprised, but she partly guessed at the truth, and made no comment, only saying,

"You knew him yourself, then, Rachel?"

"If it's the same one as I fancy, I did, Miss Sarah; and I wish I never had, nor no one else here either; though, maybe, 'twouldn't ha' made much odds," she concluded, in a lower tone.

"Who is he, then?"

Now Sarah repeated the old question, not that she had absolutely disbelieved her father, but she was not sorry his statement should be confirmed, and it was a good introduction to a quest of further particulars, such as she hoped Rachel would be able to add to the bald fact she alone knew; but the old servant's present answer was nearly word for word what her master's had been.

"An old clerk of Mr. Lockstone's, miss—nothing more."

"A very reputable one, too, Rachel, I should say," she replied, with a half-smile; "judging by appearances, that is."

"He was *once*," Rachel answered, almost fiercely, "and looked as well as your father himself, for that matter."

The mocking light shone very visibly in Sarah's eyes, but she put a strong constraint upon herself, and forbore to give full force to the feeling in the tone wherein she said,

"An old love, eh, Rachel?"

The woman looked quickly up. It was no good, there had been just a shade, ever so slight, but still a shade of mockery in the tone, and Rachel, ever quick to detect such things, was in a mood to be doubly so just now, and to resent them, too.

"And what if he were?" she demanded, angrily.

"Nay, Rachel, now don't quarrel with me. Why shouldn't I ask? Upon my word I didn't mean to affront you." She spoke quite truly there, and Rachel felt she did, but was

only half-appeased notwithstanding. Sarah saw it was so, and condescended to add, "You know I'm so used to Hester and all her lovers, I suppose I can't think of any one else's without it's amusing me, as they do; but I really should like to hear about you and yours, Rachel, I should, indeed. There, sit down and tell me," she spoke half-kindly, half-imperiously, and the woman who had known her from babyhood, and loved her in a fashion, obeyed so far as sitting down went, but she did not speak, only sat with her hands on her knees, holding the old-fashioned brass candlestick between them, and seeming perfectly indifferent, perhaps unconscious of the flame that flickered up in her face and threw its chief light there—her eyes were fixed moodily on the opposite wall.

Sarah watched her in silence for a minute, glad her own face was in shadow, then she said,

"Well, Rachel?" and the tone made the woman start, as she had intended. It was that of command, such as she had been used to hear from those lips for many years now.

The habit of obedience in a general way had grown strong, and she yielded to it now instinctively, as Sarah had hoped and expected.

"Well, miss, he did pretend to care for me, and I was fool enough to believe him then."

"Is it long ago?"

"Long! I should just think it was. Before—yes, just before you were born; he'd been here above a year then, but up to that time——"

"What?" asked Sarah, gently for her, seeing the woman's face contract, as with a spasm of pain, as she paused.

"Ah! if it hadn't been for that," said Rachel, and the pain came into her voice and made it shrill as she spoke, "it wouldn't have been so bad! but for the thought of Joel—poor Joel! I shouldn't mind so much now," and Rachel, hard, wrinkled, brown-faced Rachel, absolutely dashed away a tear from her still fine but generally harsh eyes.

"Who was Joel, then?" again asked Sarah, who found she must help the story on.

"The only relation I ever had—to know, I mean, of course—in all the world; he was

a far-away cousin of my mother's, and a big lad when I was only a bit of a child, and he'd come and see me at the workhouse many a time, and bring me things, as I know now he must have denied himself half his food to get. I'd only him to care for then, and I did care for him—as to that, I allers did care for him, only he got to care for me as I couldn't—perhaps I might if I'd gone on trying as he asked me to, and as I promised; but I loved him dearly, like a father or an elder brother. Oh! if Anthony had never come between us!"

It was curious, but all the time Rachel was speaking she did so more as if going over her story in an outspoken soliloquy than as if telling it to an interested listener. Probably from an unconscious but deep feeling that there was no real sympathy with her in the present auditor's breast, in spite of the sentences which filled up her own pauses.

"He was jealous?" half asked half suggested Sarah.

"N—n—no, I don't think it was that. I was very young then, younger than you are now even, Miss Sarah," and Rachel looked at

the handsome face beside her with a dim consciousness that its possessor would never have been guilty, however young, of the soft-hearted folly and vanity that had clouded her own youth. Turning away again, she went on, "And people said I was pretty—there—I know I was—my glass told me that—though I'm ugly enough now—and Anthony Hicks seemed to me a sort of a gentleman, and a dashing one, too, so I must needs be fool enough to set to watching him in, in the morning, and out at night. Poor Joel! he'd have given his right hand if I'd ever looked out for him like that——"

"Yes, Rachel."

"Well, by-and-by Anthony finds out what a fool I am, and he begins noticing me, and I'm as proud as a peacock, and begin thinking I shall be a lady—a lawyer's wife, and as good as my mistress. Hicks said he didn't mean to keep clerk all his life; and then Joel, he soon saw how it was, and he pretty near broke his heart, poor fellow! Well, it's odd how such things go, I fancied I loved Anthony Hicks in two months dearer than

ever I'd done poor Joel in all those years."

"And what did he do?"

"Went away for a bit, and then came back to try his chance again, he said—let each have a fair run for it; just as if it wasn't all over already. Then Anthony tried being friends with him, and Joel found he'd wild ways, and told me, and I—I said I liked him the better for them; but that wasn't true, only it vexed me so, and Joel telling of him; and, oh, dear! oh, dear! he believed me, and took to wild ways himself. They were quite different in him though—seemed so to me at least, and a deal worse than with Anthony; and last of all the two got quarrelling when they were both in liquor, and tried to fight, but Joel's foot slipped, so they said, and he got an ugly knock on his head, and—and he died."

"What, at once?" asked Sarah, really a little shocked.

"No, they took him to the infirmary, and he lived a week; but I thought I should never have been happy again. That sobered me, and it was well it did, or I don't know

how I should have borne the rest—and without Joel to comfort me."

"What?"

"Why, Tony went off—your father sent him, he *told* me; and he was away, oh! such a weary long time, and when he came back he was grander than ever."

"And not so fond of you, Rachel?"

Sarah guarded her tone very carefully this time.

"Well, yes, but he said he was going off again, should go off on the sudden and very quiet, and wanted me to go with him, and be married afterwards, and I told him I wouldn't, and he did go one morning, and I never knew a word, and have never seen him since till to-day. I didn't think he meant it," she concluded, under her breath.

No, or Rachel would have gone with him, in spite of all, so wildly did she then love that worthless scapegrace, Anthony Hicks. His going had made her the prematurely old and wrinkled woman she now was, the hard, cross-grained fellow-servant all the younger maids had held in abhorrence as well as awe.

There was a long pause. Sarah did not break it this time, till the rumbling of wheels in the distance warned her the carriage was coming, then she said softly,

"I wonder what could have made him go away."

"I don't know; he said something of getting what would make our fortune if he did; but I don't fancy there was much truth in it. Sometimes I've thought he'd got into so many scrapes Merestown had grown too hot for him, as Joel always said it would."

"Did he stay with my father to the last?"

"Oh! yes, up to the very night before he was missing—very late he was that night, I remember, and master, too—they were shut up together in the office long after his time was up."

"Did my father know he was going?"

"Law, no, Miss Sarah, he was as much surprised as any of us; though it's not his way to say much, he did say a good deal that morning, and was terribly put out for a clerk, he was so busy at the Manor just then."

"How?" and Sarah's voice sounded just the same, though the words had interested her beyond any that had gone before.

"Why, it was just about the time the fuss was about the young gentleman's marriage, the Mr. Lee as is now, I mean, and the old gentleman ill, and all that."

"Oh! and you don't know at all where this man went?"

Rachel shook her head. With the telling of the story of her youth, much of her emotion had passed away, and she was now almost the same Rachel as ever.

"And he never came back once all these years till to-day?"

"No—I never saw him, at least, if he did, or heard of him—there's your father."

"Yes; and abominably late he is. Well, Rachel, good-bye. Remember, I shall look in on you sometimes, and I shall quite want to know when you see this man again," and Sarah went downstairs and entered the carriage, without a word to Mr. Lockstone, though a keen glance had shown her he was more pallid than ever, and that his hands

shook nervously as he drew on his gloves.

Rachel gave one look after the carriage as it dashed away through the dimness, muttering as she returned and closed the door,

"What is she after now, I wonder—something."

CHAPTER XVI.

"AND to-night I had hoped our Mabel might take her place among her equals —perhaps been the belle of the room," thought Mrs. Lee, very sadly, as she sat as much in the shade as the persistent squareness of the sitting-room at No. 5, Newman's Buildings allowed, watching her daughter humouring the querulousness of the old man's convalescence.

It was between eight and nine, the tea had long been removed, the lamp stood alone in its glory in the middle of the table, and as the time stole on Mrs. Lee's thoughts had flown away to a very different scene, which was now probably commencing not so very far away from that poor little room. Even balls began earlier some forty years ago, and it was the county ball of which poor Mrs. Lee was now thinking. Yes, this was the

night—the night of the county ball—looked forward to so long by many a fair young matron and eager pleasure-loving girl; looked back to so often with regret as having passed; the *one* exciting bit of gaiety which alone really broke the tedium of that winter's sojourn in the country—so very wearisome and dull to those petticoat wearers who could not, or did not, venture to emulate their masculine relatives' exploits in the hunting-field and coursing-ground.

The county ball was a grand affair at Merestown, too—a very grand affair. Nobody ever failed to go without a very valid excuse indeed, and anybody who could not go regretted the circumstance very sincerely. The county families always mustered strongly. Married sons and married daughters were certain to choose the time of the county ball for visits to the paternal roof, if so doing was in any way feasible. Then visitors were asked with the one object of enlivening the ball, so that altogether it was no wonder that so much was thought, talked, and written about it!

Poor Mrs. Lee! Hers was by no means an ambitious soul—very happily for herself, or how would her sufferings during the past few years have been quadrupled. She had lived contentedly at the Manor all the years of her married life in a seclusion which would have been unendurable to most women. The neglect, which to other ladies in her position would have been gall and wormwood, was unfelt, scarcely even noticed, except when it irritated her husband.

While he remained tolerably healthy in body and mind, while her darling children were children still, Mrs. Lee was happy, entirely happy. She had known straitened circumstances, almost privation, and to her the beauty and luxury of such a home as the Manor was enjoyment, happiness enough. She had mixed very little in society, and that little, though she *had* met her husband there, had rather given her a distaste to it; and, perhaps, in her inmost soul, unrecognised even by herself, there was a feeling of rejoicing and escape at her present enforced immunity from it. Her visits to her hus-

band's cottages, her almsgiving of kind words and deeds, as well as of money, food, and clothes to the sick and suffering, well occupied what little leisure was left her from the calls of her happy home life, and afforded her all she required of interest and excitement from without. Mind, heart, and soul of the lady of Lee Manor were each and all filled—*well* filled.

And so it went on, till "the little ones" ceased to be such, and as they budded into noble youth and lovely maidenhood, Mrs. Lee recognised the want she had failed to see before. Yes, it was not well that they should lead the isolated life which had hitherto made her happiness, and she began to look around and note the doings and ways of the neighbours who *ought* to have been her friends and associates.

The result was a discovery that society was not confined to that peculiar sort, the English abroad—and that society forty years back, remember—with which she alone was conversant, and her mother's heart grew yet more anxious than her husband's had ever been,

even in the days when most impatient and irate at the neighbourhood's neglect of his wife, that they should visit at last, that some opening should offer for Edward and Mabel's introduction to those with whom they had a right to mix. Nor was she without hope of this, for, as before noticed, some slight advances had of late been made, and it was now her chief care and object that these should be met in such a manner as to encourage others.

No want of welcome, no resentment of former slights, on *her* part, at least, should check this weakly plant of friendliness in the bud; it had been long, very long in shooting at all—no frost of coldness must nip it now. So the few straggling callers at Lee Manor were unexpectedly pleased with its lady, though they found its lord barely courteous and somewhat *distrait* in manner, and they left it declaring "Mrs. Lee must be a lady, wherever that queer man had picked her up; she was so gentle, so charmingly refined, only a little naïve, but that made her all the more piquante."

Just a little longer and it was very pos-

sible Mrs. Lee and her handsome children might have become the fashion down in their county, but that "little longer" was not allowed—had Stephen Lockstone suspected there might be danger in it?—the season called the neighbourhood to London before any real friendliness had been established between even one county family and that of the Manor, and before they returned, the Lees had dropped altogether out of their circle, were lost to it completely; and now it was only, "Dear, dear, have you heard about the Lees? —such an old family, too—how shocking!— what terrible imprudence!"

"It serves that stupid bear of a man right —how horribly he behaved, dear, didn't he? But I *am* sorry for his wife, and those children, too, what has become of them, I wonder?"

"Ah! gone abroad—well, it's the best thing, I suppose, when those sort of things happen. I'm really grieved; but to be sure I've heard he picked her up abroad, so it's the sort of life she's been used to."

No one cared to ascertain the real facts, no one, had they known them, would have

dreamed of seeking the gentle lady out, however charming or piquante, at No. 5, Newman's Buildings!

Mrs. Lee knew this very well, and she did not expect that they should. Nevertheless the knowledge did not make her regret any the less bitter, nor the utter destruction of all her newborn hopes easier or pleasanter to bear; and this night of all others she felt these most acutely, for at this same county ball Mabel was to have "come out," and the doting mother had expected great things from the event. Mabel, once seen in her own proper sphere, must be recognized at once as a true Lee; was she not the living representative of the beauty of 1660, whose portrait by Sir Peter Lely was the chief ornament of the picture gallery, only Mabel's face possessed sweetness as its distinguishing characteristic in lieu of the coquetry which was that of the elder Lee! Once seen she *must* be admired, loved, was the secret conviction of the mother's heart. Therefore she would be sought, and so all come right in the end. Alas! that was all over now, the vision vanished. By this

time Lady Olivia Frazer had probably forgotten completely all about that little talk upon the point, which, slight as it had been, had sufficed to paint a very pretty, very gratifying picture on Mrs. Lee's mind.

Her beautiful Mabel, sole daughter of the Lees, *chaperoned* to this same county ball by Lady Olivia herself. Lady Olivia, eldest daughter to the Earl of Avonsdale, of Neville Castle, and hardly ten years Mabel's senior, though already the mother of five little Frazers. Ah! *she* had forgotten all about it, no doubt, but poor Mrs. Lee had not, she only wished she had, as she sat there in the little square parlour of No. 5, Newman's Buildings, her thoughts, her mind, in spite of herself, not with her feeble husband and patient child, but away in the large room of Merestown's chief Inn, where the stewards were already busy, where Mabel ought to have been, might have been now dancing her first dance in public, perhaps; and the sad mother, now first fully realising the privileges and advantages of station and birth, and valuing them unduly, of course, now they were lost,

as it is our nature to do, wiped a few scalding tears warily from her soft, loving eyes, at the same moment that Mr. Lee querulously exclaimed,

"It is time for my soup, Mabel, I'm quite sure it is, and I want it directly," and his voice was raised to a painfully shrill pitch in his impatience.

Mabel glanced furtively at the timepiece, the only one they had brought with them, and not a very ornamental one, but their own, or rather Mabel's, since it had been specially given to her years back for the school-room.

It still wanted a full quarter to nine. Deborah was punctuality itself, and her father had been fidgeting for this soup for half an hour past already. A weary look rose for a moment to the young girl's face, and quickly as it was banished, and replaced by a sweet, loving smile, Mrs. Lee saw it, and with a sharp, bitter pang.

"Shall I go and see about it, papa?"

"*You?* No, of course not, my darling—ring the bell. Why can't the servants attend

to their work? They've been very irregular lately, very, and I've not heard the stable clock strike for months, I'm sure. They keep it slow, the knaves, I'm sure they do."

Poor lord of Lee Manor! He was that still in fancy more often than was pleasant or good for his two gentle companions. This wrung their heart more than all, not only as proving how completely his mind had failed, but because the full consciousness of all his calamities, which generally succeeded such outbursts as these, was so inexpressibly painful.

"You did not care for your tea to-night, papa, and you are hungry," faltered Mabel, afraid to leave the subject altogether, yet dreading any comment that suggested itself to her.

"Tea!—tea!" said the old man, in a puzzled tone. "Ah! no," he went on, more briskly, "the rolls weren't fresh, Mabel, and the butter —it was very nasty, Mabel, I didn't like it," he concluded, piteously, looking in his child's face for sympathy. Alas! such petty trifles were of more import to him now as a rule

than the one great crushing grief of which they were the natural consequences.

"It wasn't very nice, papa, dear. We must try and get some better."

"Yes, tell them I won't have it, Mabel. They take advantage of my being ill, shut up here; but I'll go to the home farm myself to-morrow morning, Mabel. Remember, my dear, to-morrow morning. You'll remind me, eh, Mabel?"

"Yes," poor Mabel answered, with downcast eyes, when she found silence impossible.

"They oughtn't to do it. I can't think what Stephen Lockstone——"

Ah! that name recalled it all, and the old man came to an abrupt pause as he uttered it, while its sound sent a creeping shiver through Mabel's whole frame.

She could *not* attempt an answer this time, only fixed her soft eyes with mute pity on her father's face. She was surprised to see it unwontedly excited, working with passion, and in great alarm she hastened to him and put her arm caressingly over his shoulder, as he broke out incoherently,

"It's cruel, Mabel, it's very cruel; but he shan't—he shan't—he can't, you know—and he knows, too, it's no good—it's a trick, a deception. I found it out, Mabel, I did—I've got it safe—safe, you know," sinking his voice to a mysterious whisper, "and, Mabel—Mabel, you shall bring them to me, dear, and we'll show it to somebody else—an honest one, dear, and he shan't—he shan't, I say. He can't, Mabel, can he?"

"No, father, dear," Mabel hastened to answer in her most soothing tones, for she was greatly alarmed at the violent agitation her father had put himself into, and though entirely at a loss to conceive at what he was aiming, of what speaking, unless of Mr. Lockstone's general proceedings, she caught eagerly at the first chance of calming him. Her touch and words had the desired effect, and, exhausted by his emotion, the old man once more subsided, murmuring indistinctly,

"To-morrow—yes, we'll do it to-morrow morning."

Was it only the home farm and the butter he was thinking of, after all? Some such

question flitted across Mabel's mind as she watched the lined face resume its placid vacancy of expression, and the eyelids droop wearily over the now quiet eyes—so fierce a moment ago. It did not much matter, she thought; whatever it was, it had had the good effect of averting the usual painful conclusion to such fits of oblivion to their changed estate as had occurred just now, while the whole scene had lessened the dreaded quarter of an hour so considerably, Deborah would probably arrive with the soup before her father again roused himself to ask for it, and to tax her just now almost exhausted powers of amusing him and diverting his childish impatience for the one thing happening to occupy his thoughts.

Yes, nine o'clock came, and Deborah with it, and the poor feeble old man did not sit up in his chair or open his eyes till Mabel herself called his attention to the excellent basin of soup now smoking before him. After eating it he was helped upstairs, and went to bed, and Mabel was left to a welcome hour of solitude and repose, while her mother was

attending on her husband as far as he would permit her assistance.

Sometimes Mrs. Lee came down again, sometimes not. To-night she returned to the room in less than the usual time, her step unusually brisk, her face eager.

"Mabel," she said, as she came up to her child, and laid a caressing hand fondly on the rich tresses of hair coiled about the shapely head, "Mabel, darling, do you think that —that there was anything in what he said?" and she looked anxiously, yearningly in Mabel's face.

Poor Mrs. Lee! It was no thought for yourself, no regret on your own account, that had woke in your heart that painfully intense desire to glean hope, meaning, from your husband's random words.

Mabel had been reading—reading one of the then not long published "Waverley Novels," one she had not read before. Dr. Armsdaile had brought it her only that morning, and she was already lost in its absorbing interest, forgetful alike of the evening's petty but wearing, constantly-recurring trials, and

of her own exceeding weariness of mind, when her mother's address startled her. She looked up puzzled, but with a brighter look on her face than it had worn since dinner, and on this Mrs. Lee feasted her eyes thankfully. Mabel was not thinking of the county ball, evidently not longing to be there, but grieving afresh over all that prevented it. Perhaps she did not even remember *this* was the night. Mrs. Lee was inclined to think not as she watched her child trying to recall what her mother alluded to—and Mrs. Lee was right.

"I—I'm afraid, mamma, I don't quite know what you mean," Mabel answered, at last. Those mind-wanderings of the broken man were such painful topics to the wilfully blind wife and daughter that she feared to mistake her mother's meaning, and wound her unwittingly.

"What he said about having something safe, Mabel, and showing it to an honest one. Do you think there is something—something we don't know that is of consequence? Surely there was a meaning in it," and her eyes sought Mabel's wistfully.

The latter thought for a moment before answering, then she said,

"No, I'm afraid not, mamma—not the meaning you were hoping for, at least. It struck me as something unusual while he spoke, but I don't think it had any meaning —any *particular* meaning, that is."

Mrs. Lee's countenance fell a little, but she exclaimed,

"It struck you, too, Mabel, did it? I daresay I am very silly, and that there was no special meaning in it, as you say; but still, Mabel, do you know I cannot help feeling there was, and I feel so still." After a minute's pause she added fervently, "Oh! my darling, if it would please God to restore your father to what he was—if he could but tell us!" and she paced up and down the room in a manner very unlike her ordinary peculiarly calm and equable demeanour.

Mabel watched her in surprise, and some anxiety. It was a most unusual thing for her gentle mother to be thus moved. Presently she stopped, and sitting down by Mabel's side said, in a low voice,

"Mabel, sometimes I fear, I almost fear we were not wise or right in shrinking from—from appealing to—Perhaps we ought to have given some one authority to act for us. Dr. Armsdaile thought so, you know," and her voice faltered, the wifely shielding and sheltering care was beginning to be sorely opposed by the mother's anxieties and loving cares.

"Well, dear mamma, if it is so it is not too late. We have done it at last—at least Edward has—and you need not reproach yourself about it. Indeed—indeed, mamma," she added, anxiously, "I am afraid it will prove all useless. I don't think there is any chance——"

She brought her sentence to an abrupt end. She had intended to say boldly "of our recovering our home," but she found there *was* a great chance of her breaking down should she attempt it, so left the blank her mother could fill up but too well.

"True, dear, it is done at last. I had forgotten at the moment, and was only thinking of our past forbearance. How soon can we

hear again, Mabel? They will send by the next mail, will they not?"

"Oh! yes, my uncle would be sure to be back then, Edward said; and I think a letter may come every day now, mamma."

Mrs. Lee said no more, but she thought a great deal as she sat by her child's side, one hand on hers. She regretted past weakness on her own part, as she was inclined, hardly, to term her tenderness for her husband; wondered anxiously as to the possibility of those words of his having any hidden meaning or not; thought once more of the ball, of Mabel, of her *not* being there; and finally, as she at last went upstairs again, marvelled, "Were those people there?—those now in her own old home?—had *they* gained admittance to the county ball?"

CHAPTER XVII.

ADMITTANCE to the Merestown county ball was not a natural consequence of ability and willingness to pay for your tickets. No. The tickets could only be obtained through the stewards, and it was a perfectly optional matter whether or not those gentlemen chose to accord them; while admittance to the assembly was all the more eagerly desired by any whose birth or position was such as to render it doubtful whether these grants would be unhesitatingly accorded.

An anxious desire to be among the happy privileged, to give her own fair face the chance of bearing off the palm of beauty from the county belles, had arisen in Hester Lockstone's mind from the first instant that entrance into such a paradise seemed possible to her—a desire by no means lessened by the knowledge that her wedding-day was almost fixed,

the settlements already drawn, and Mr. Geldfinder by no means ambitious of accompanying her, or of her going alone, into all the dazzling allurements and untried novelties of the county ball society. He yielded his own wishes to hers—of course, he always did; but, nevertheless, had clearly intimated that he thought it would be just as well, much more pleasant, if she gave up all idea of going.

"Isn't it stupid of him, Sarah?" Hester indolently asked, as she poised some delicate muslins in her hands, the better to estimate their respective merits.

"On the contrary, I am quite delighted to find he can venture even to possess, much more to express, an opinion of his own, though only on one point—*before* marriage," was Sarah's sarcastic and carefully emphasised reply.

Hester's large eyes were lazily raised, as usual, to her sister's face.

"I don't know what you mean, Sarah—I never do; but I can't see why Harman can't have the same opinion with me," she pouted.

"How reasonable you are, Hester! Once

dissentient—for a million times consenting. My dear, if this affects you so strongly," and she looked at the supine figure reclining near her in an easy chair with scornful ridicule, "how will you endure the inevitable reverse of the pretty picture of all-enduring subservience now presented by your devoted swain?"

"I don't want any pictures—I only want Harman to like to go to the ball," Hestèr answered petulantly, and so foolishly that Sarah looked at her this time in genuine surprise. Did she really not see the gist of her remarks, or would she not take the trouble to discover it?

"It is only on *your* account he objects to go," she said, after a moment's pause of consideration.

"My account! I do wish, Sarah, you would not talk such nonsense—it's no use telling me that, you know. If he'd any desire to please me in it, he'd be delighted to go. I'm sure poor Willie Turner would."

"Why not elect him *cavaliere servente* for the evening, then? No doubt he would fly

at your behest, and these last few weeks of cold looks and rebuffs would be as short in remembrance as Jacob's service for Rachel."

"I'm sure I'm quite willing he should go," returned Hester, in an injured tone; "it was you yourself, remember, who said I couldn't have both."

"Nay, Hester, if you attempt to quote me, do so correctly, let me beg. I simply inquired whether you thought it possible to *marry* both."

"Well, it's all the same—you were very teasing, as you always are. I believe you wanted one of them yourself," ventured Hester, roused to something of recrimination by the cool, provoking tone of her sister.

"Ah!" was the answer of the latter, no whit moved; "and which would you assign me, most considerate sister, supposing such to be the case? Which would suit me best, eh?"

Hester would have replied, had she known how, and had she dared, that any assignment on her part would be rendered worse than useless by the resistance of the young men to

any such transfer of their fealty. Something of the sort passed through her mind, and gave a momentary light to her eyes, as was occasionally the case when baited beyond endurance. Sarah saw it and was gratified. She gloried in rousing the indolent spirit of her sister, no matter by what means. Though but a transient and very feeble kindling, every fresh success proved some latent fire did exist; and this simple conviction was a satisfaction, however hopeless was the prospect of its ever being excited to any purpose. She watched her now with mingled curiosity and speculation, but no words came, and the eyes resumed their ordinary insipid gentleness, the figure its indolent repose.

"So it is as much trouble to answer as it is to understand," she said at last; "for once I will repeat my assertion—it is on *your* account Mr. Geldfinder objects to your presence at the ball."

This time Hester let her muslins fall and looked up, in what Willie Turner would probably have thought "pretty bewilderment," at her puzzle-speaking sister. To Sarah it

appeared simple stupidity, and she impatiently exclaimed,

"On my word, Hester, you tempt me occasionally to believe you a born idiot. Why is your own heart so set on this thing?"

"The ball! Law, Sarah, what a question! Doesn't everybody like to go who can?—and—and it isn't pleasant to be left out of what other people enjoy, of course, and—and all that."

"And Miss Lockstone does not anticipate that her beauty will be the *least* admired in such an assembly, and she is not sorry a chance for competition in that respect should offer with the first people in the county, and—and would not be inconsolable to find a twelfth or thirteenth—which is it, by the way?—admirer among the *very* grand gentlemen frequenting it; and—and all that," sneered Sarah; adding, after a moment's pause, "and it is precisely for those reasons Mr. Geldfinder would prefer your not going, Hester. He knows you are quite pretty enough to charm even a Neville; while I suspect he does not know with equal certainty

how firm his hold on your *heart* might prove should such a catastrophe befall."

Hester simpered a little, nay, even coloured at this; she felt greatly flattered at such a speech from Sarah, and as she drawled forth "What nonsense," it was quite evident to that singularly clear-sighted girl that notions akin to those she had hinted at must have arisen in her sister's mind before, though probably only in a misty sort of fashion, which she by no means disliked some clear elucidation of from herself.

She gave a quick, piercing glance at the momentarily excited face, and then laughed her old low, scornful laugh.

"So you *had* thought of so lamentable a contingency as not impossible? Could you not have been honest for once and allowed it?" She paused again for a few seconds, still contemplating her sister, and then asked in a different tone, her eyes intently fixed on Hester's, "Granted that you had one of these gentry at your feet, would you dismiss this man as you did Frank Marsden? Tell the truth this time, Hester, if you please," she added, determinedly.

Hester betook herself to her ordinary refuge when close pressed, and covered her face with her handkerchief.

"You are very unkind, Sarah. I wish you wouldn't talk so. *I* didn't *dismiss* poor Frank, as you call it. I wish you wouldn't talk like that—but you've no feeling—you never have about these things."

"What things? The depth of feeling which prompts people to change their lovers once a month or so? Well, I'm afraid I do *not* sympathise with such a proceeding, as perhaps I ought. And now suppose you answer my question. Would you turn Mr. Geldfinder over if you found his substitute in some great gun at the Merestown ball?"

"How you do tease, Sarah! How should I know?—of course not. How could I, unless he liked?"

"Ah!—well, Hester, it is because he does *not* like, that he ventures to hint a distaste to your pleasure in this instance. He wouldn't in the least mind your going as Mrs. Geldfinder; but *till* that happy change in your condition is safely effected, he would prefer not running more risks of losing his prize

than he can help; and, I must say, *I* appreciate his wisdom."

Hester gave no other reply to this than pouting her red lips rather more than before; and Sarah, her flashing eyes brimming over with scorn, walked impatiently towards the windows, and looked out on the stretch of park before them, white with a newly-fallen carpet of snow, the bare trees motionless, the air hushed, the sky leaden, all nature stilled into that rare and somewhat oppressive quiet which betokens another "fall" before long. She gazed out long and fixedly, but probably saw as little of the landscape as she thought about it. By-and-by, as Hester muttered something relative to the muslins she was still holding, she turned round, and coming slowly back to the fireplace, kicked the heap of finery spread before her sister somewhat contemptuously, as she asked,

"What is the good of taking all this pains, when you are not sure of going to the place after all?"

Hester dropped her muslins and uttered a cry of dismay.

"Not sure of going!—Sarah, what do you mean?"

"I don't generally take the trouble to say anything I do not think," retorted her sister, calmly; "and I repeat, to what end decide on the dress for a ball to which it is very uncertain if you will be able to go."

"I mean to go, Sarah—I have told Harman so," gasped Hester.

"Without tickets?" returned Sarah, calmly. "I doubt if even your dazzling beauty would overcome that *slight* obstacle. It wouldn't be pleasant to be turned away from the door."

"But we have tickets, of course."

"I beg your pardon, I am sorry to contradict you, but we have not. They are not sent unless applied for. We have not applied, and what is more, I strongly doubt your father's having the slightest intention of asking for any."

"Oh! Sarah," and there was real trouble in Hester's tones; "but you will make him, won't you? Oh! you will!"

Sarah laughed.

"What will you do if I say no? Bribe

me with the reversionary interest in Messrs. Turner and Geldfinder, for which you believed me so anxious just now; or go and boldly demand the tickets from your father yourself, as your *right*, the elder born?" and the lip curled scornfully.

"Oh! Sarah, dear Sarah, you know I can't. You will get them, won't you? You can't be so cruel!" and Hester positively turned pale with dismay.

"I *could* be, as you very well know, Hester, and most probably should if I did not think it perfectly right I should get the tickets myself. I can put you out of your misery so far. I do intend the tickets to be applied for, but, remember, they may be refused."

This was almost a worse evil than the other, but before Hester could recover from her consternation at its possibility to make any observation on it, her sister had left the room. She was in no mood for any more of those helpless, peevish platitudes just then; besides, it had occurred to her that it really was time to see about the tickets. Her father had remained at home that day, a most un-

usual thing, and she determined the matter should be decided without another moment's unnecessary delay. After a few minutes' reflection as to Stephen Lockstone's probable whereabouts, she concluded he would be found in the breakfast-room. Thither she accordingly repaired, and found him sitting with his head upon his arm, and that on the table before him. The morning paper, in which he had attempted to appear absorbed, had fallen unheeded at his feet; he was lost in a reverie which his knitted brows and compressed lips sufficiently betokened was of no pleasanter character than usual. He started violently as Sarah approached, making a futile, helpless effort to regain the newspaper.

"Spare yourself the exertion, sir, I beg," was her sarcastic observation as she noted the spasmodic movement, "it is quite needless. I am alone, and I, as you are well aware, can see through any blinds of your manufacture."

Stephen Lockstone groaned, or rather he would have done so had he dared. Sarah's presence reduced the sound he uttered to

something like a grunt. He would fain have spoken, but for the positive impossibility of finding words.

"The news was not sufficiently exciting to rivet your attention this morning, and so you fell asleep over the attempt to get interested, no doubt," proceeded his daughter, scoffingly. "And truly I scarcely wonder. It is the fitting, legitimate result for a country squire, when he chances to spend the intermediate hours between a heavy breakfast and equally weighty luncheon by his fireside, instead of bestirring himself among his acres. By the way, did you ever carry a gun, sir?"

"What —— folly," was the angry exclamation responding to this query, which Sarah put as innocently as though really seeking information.

Her rejoinder, too, was meekness itself, though aggravating to a degree to one who knew her as well as did her father.

"Oh! pray pardon me—above all, please spare me such naughty words. Of course I didn't mean to suggest your taking a gun in the snow, only if you don't shoot, yourself,

mightn't your friends like to try the Manor preserves?"

"He—he doesn't know how to shoot," blurted forth Stephen Lockstone, and then all but wished himself shot for the inadvertence.

Sarah's worst look, that cool, cruel, questioning, irresistible gaze, was upon him in an instant. What a mistake he had made! He had been a fool indeed. No after correction, no self-contradiction or mystifying, would avail here. He knew that but too well, and preserved a sullen silence, hardly knowing whether he felt relieved or more disturbed when Sarah's expression changed, and she simply observed, with intense contempt of tone,

"Cannot shoot! No, I should not think *he* could."

Of whom was she thinking? Had she guessed? What did she know?—or rather what did she not know? But he had hardly time to ask himself these questions, and feel how completely his daughter was an enigma to him, however plainly he and his best-laid

plans were read by her, when she went on in a totally changed tone,

"*I* was thinking of very different people when I spoke of your *friends*. If you choose to forget what friends the master of the Manor House has a right to claim, I do not; and I fancy the young Nevilles, for example, would not object to carry a gun over our well-stocked acres."

"The—the Nevilles?" murmured Stephen Lockstone, and for once he spoke without an oath, and with one genuine and single feeling —surprise.

"The *Nevilles*—yes—I beg your pardon— I fancied my pronunciation even unusually distinct, or—stay, they are made of superior clay to that of others, perhaps? Ah! I see it is so, and *you* are in the secret. Well, I confess I was not, and from what little I have heard and seen of them, I judged they were very much like other people. They don't shoot, then?"

"Sarah! what is it you mean? for the life of me I can't tell," and once again, in very desperation, he spoke the simple truth.

"Indeed! Considering your ordinary powers of comprehension, sir, which occasionally outrun my powers of expression, that is surprising; but to reward such rare humility, I will speak very plainly. It is high time you invited the young Nevilles, and some of your other neighbours, to try the Manor covers. You have taken very excellent care they should be kept forbidden ground to all but the keepers for as many years as I can remember. Now it is time the key should be turned. The privilege will be welcomed all the more eagerly, depend on it, for the past abstinence. Suppose you write a note or two to-day. We have not much time left, remember—I will drive in with you after luncheon, and we can leave one for the Nevilles, with your application for the ball tickets—or you have them, perhaps?"

And then Stephen Lockstone, who, careful to observe Sarah's prohibition of oaths before the servants, indemnified himself wholesale when alone with his family for such trying abstinence, spit forth a torrent of unseemly words, but nevertheless he felt there was much

weight in those of his tormentor. Why had he kept the Manor covers so carefully for all these years?—why thrown cold water on all poor Mr Lee's feeble proposals regarding shooting parties? *Battues* were not in those days. Why suavely but determinedly set aside Mrs. Lee's sweet but firm arguments regarding the same matter? Why—but with the very idea now put before him to be acted on by his daughter. Did she not know after all, or did she suspect—and yet urge him on. Oh! if he could but feel as bold, now that his object was accomplished, with but that one terror to be dreaded, as he had felt before—that Sarah had been a boy—that—but Sarah's voice, cold and cutting as the brightest steel, broke on his self-communings, regrets, and wishes.

"If you have quite ended a blasphemous tirade more befitting that respectable acquaintance of yours, Tony Hicks, than the lord of Lee Manor, sir, perhaps you will kindly inform me at what hour you propose ordering the carriage; if I am not mistaken, this is one of the days the stewards are supposed to attend at the 'Roebuck' to receive applications for

tickets, therefore it will suit remarkably well."

Stephen Lockstone winced, and grew more pallid than ever as his daughter spoke. Yes, she had touched him to the quick then, as she had fully intended; and a short, bright flash of triumph darted from her eyes, composed the next instant to a quiet but very determined gaze upon her quailing father. A question rose to his lips, and had almost escaped them, but it was checked in time, and he sullenly muttered,

"Do you suppose you will get tickets *this* year?"

"Yes. At any rate, if we do *not*, neither shall we next. Take your position at once, sir—if you have one grain of courage to occupy it, at least."

And Stephen Lockstone rang the bell and ordered the carriage, and by-and-by he and his resolute younger daughter dashed up to the porch of the "Roebuck." Very busy that little inn thought itself on that day—very busy, and very grand, for two or three of the stewards really were there, though it was by no means a matter of course that they should

be, as Mr. Wellcome, the portly master of the place, and whilom head butler at Castle Neville, as often as not transacted all the real business connected with the ball himself. He glanced out of the door now as the handsome carriage and prancing horses drew up at it. Not always did he condescend to greet even his best customers himself, and now, after a passing scrutiny of the vehicle, he turned on his heel with an expression on his jovial face which its occupants might scarcely have relished—one of them, that is; Sarah would have been indifferent, or, more probably, would have taken measures to change it very quickly.

"Are you to act a lacquey's part, and dance attendance yourself on an old servant?" she asked, her tone low and contemptuous, as she saw her father preparing to descend. He desisted mechanically, and she said aloud,

"You had better send for Mr. Wellcome, perhaps he can tell us if any one is here."

So the footman went, and the innkeeper, after keeping them waiting some five minutes, slowly descended the doorsteps, his hat on, and his manner particularly indifferent.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Lockstone?" he inquired, staying his farther progress, while still beneath the shelter of his portico.

Before that hesitating gentleman had time to answer, however, Sarah came to the rescue, her brilliant eyes fixed on the abashed innkeeper's face, her haughty gesture motioning him nearer.

"We wish to know what gentlemen are in the steward's room to-day, Mr. Wellcome. Be good enough to ascertain, if you please—particularly if either of the Mr. Nevilles is there."

In spite of himself Mr. Wellcome now stood at the carriage door, bowing low, too, yes, absolutely bowing to the beautiful face before him, though owned by Stephen Lockstone's daughter. "Dashed if he could help it," as he afterwards explained apologetically to his wife; "there she sat, as much at ease as a born lady, and with such eyes—lor! Why, Lady Olivia, no, nor that friend of hers, the beauty from London we all thought so much of at Castle Neville the year of the wedding, you know, even she couldn't hold a candle to her. She is handsome, and no mistake!"

So Mr. Wellcome, half mechanically, half unwillingly, wholly bewildered for the moment, found himself doing her haughty behest, while the familiar smile of intense contempt stole over Sarah's features as she recognized that precise effect she had calculated on producing.

Two stewards of the ball were lounging in the comfortable little room appropriated to them at the "Roebuck," the *great* hotel, as it was considered to be at Merestown, though half a dozen such, and more, could easily be swallowed up by that magnificent piece of modern luxury at Charing Cross.

One was middle-aged, the other young, with a fresh, good-tempered face, clustering chestnut curls, and frank blue eyes, very pleasant to look upon. What little they had to do had been done, and now they were idling away the time as best they might, and very hard work they found it on that dull afternoon in a stagnant country town. The elder one sat in an easy chair, poising a paper-knife very dexterously on one finger; the young man now leant against the window-frame and looked out on the sloppy street, with its half-

melted patches of snow, all black begrimed, and little impromptu rivulets running here and there in the warmer parts; now walked over to the fire, poking it for the hundredth time, or turned over once more the miscellaneous assortment of cards and papers dexterously fitted into the frame of the chimney-glass by Mr. Wellcome's practised fingers.

"What a terrible nuisance it is stopping here in this way, Neville; but Lady Raymond particularly wished to see your sister to-day, so she has taken the carriage over, and I am a prisoner till her return; but for that I'm not sure I should have come in at all," observed Sir Charles Raymond, during an interval of obstinacy on the part of the paper-knife, when it insisted on falling three times running. "It's all a great farce, you know, and Wellcome can do it all just as well as we can."

"And better," half-yawned, half-laughed young Neville. "However, I'm only too grateful for any chance that brings you here to-day. I am doing very hard filial duty in the matter, you know, taking my father's

place. Hilloa! here comes Wellcome, something up, eh? Why, what's happened? He looks as if he had been guilty of an emotion. Is such a thing possible for our staid ex-butler? What is the missive, Sir Charles?"

"Read it, it concerns you as much as—— Oh! you have another. Well, that is capital. He's not willing one chance should escape."

"Eh? I don't understand. This thing is simply a card of admission to shoot for Fred and me, apparently; and to the Manor, too, by Jove! I'm not sorry, they're glorious preserves, and we have often longed to try our hands there, but they were kept as sacred as a Turk's seraglio. It's a favour, I can tell you, sir."

"Umph!" returned the baronet, somewhat doubtingly. "If so, it is one not extended to me. This," and he held the paper towards him, "is simply a formal note of application to us for ball tickets. Fancy that fellow Lockstone, the attorney—we shall have the apothecary applying next, I suppose. Just write word there are none, Wellcome. You know how to manage it. That is what your

father would wish, eh, Neville? Who brought the note?"

"The footman gave it me, sir," hesitated Wellcome; "but the carriage is at the door now, and the lady in it."

"What!" cried young Neville, bounding to the window. "A lady who can electrify you, Wellcome, as I gather she has, must be worth seeing."

Of that the Hon. Harry Neville had a very good though short-lived chance of judging, for Sarah's haughty face was turned full towards the hotel as he looked out; but her veil was dropped a moment after, not, however, till he had seen enough to induce a prolonged "whew—w—w!" and a rapid interception of Wellcome as he was leaving the room.

"Stop a bit. I say, Raymond, she's a regular beauty. It would be a sin to miss having her at the ball, and you know they are living at the Manor now. Of course you must draw the line somewhere. Ha! yes, I knew that was what you were going to say; but he's a landed gentleman now, you know.

Oh! let them have the tickets. Hang it all, if you could just see her you'd think she was worth swallowing one, or even two attorneys for."

So Sarah Lockstone returned with the ball tickets in her muff, and as she flung them into Hester's lap, said,

"There, Hester. Have three more dresses made up and discarded, and give your humble adorer *his* ticket with your own fair hands, then you can judge if Madame Carson's patience or his is the most inexhaustible."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"To Messrs. Sharpe, Kewter, and Watchemklose,
Solicitors, London, England.

"GENTLEMEN,—

"May I beg the favour of your immediate attention to the business I am about to entrust to you?

"My father, Mr. Lee, formerly of Lee Manor, near Merestown, has been for some time past incapable, through a long and trying illness, of conducting his affairs, and we have reason to fear there has been some very culpable neglect of his interest, to say no worse, on the part of his late agent, Mr. Stephen Lockstone, of Merestown.

"I am the only son, and in my absence there is no one in England to watch Mr. Lockstone's proceedings, or guard against any

future injury he may have it in his power to do.

"My desire is that you should undertake this business, demand an account of his past conduct from Mr. Lockstone, and see if there be no means of restoring my family to Lee Manor, whence, as I have just learned, this man has turned them out by foreclosing mortgages on the property he had bought up, my grandfather having unhappily cut off the entail before my birth.

"I have advertised my mother and sister to put you, or any agent you may send down, in possession of all the papers they have, to give you a full statement of the particulars of the facts, and I leave the matter entirely in your hands to act as you may see fit, with full confidence that you will do the best and utmost possible under the circumstances.

"My uncle, Mr. Charlton, the only other near male relative of my family, joins in my request, and renders himself responsible with myself for the consequences.

"He recommended my applying to you, and writes you by this post, confirming all I

have said, and authorising you to draw on him for any money requisite to conduct this business.

"I am, gentlemen,

"Your obedient servant,

"EDWARD LEE."

Mr. Watchemklose sat alone in his little, dark, smoke-begrimed London den as he read this letter. He did so rapidly, with a half-smile on his lip. Poor young Edward was scarcely a business man yet, and he had written in great agitation, insisting on doing so himself, though Mr. Charlton's was the really necessary missive. The lawyer tossed the letter from him for the present on a heap of many others, while he proceeded to further lessen the huge packet of unopened correspondence yet lying before him.

In due time he arrived at Mr. Charlton's communication, and over that he paused a second longer than over any other, then put it down by the side of the heap, and went forward to the business of breaking seals once more.

At last the letters were all read, orders given to various clerks, answers to many letters dotted down in a sort of private short-hand, and turned over to be copied by subordinates. Then Mr. Watchemklose took up the American despatches once more, and pondered a little further on their purport; next, he rose up and proceeded with them to another little den, dirtier and dismaller than his own, if that might be, where Mr. Sharp was busy hanging up his hat and taking off his coat, having only just come in from some far-off business jaunt.

"Read those," said the first gentleman, and the second did so, in the middle of which proceeding he rang a little handbell, and presently the third partner joined the conclave. When he had read the letters, which he did in no time at all to speak of, he looked briskly up, and said in a rapid voice, cutting his words short off, as if he had by no means time to accord them their full complement of sound,

"That man's the greatest rascal among us —long been expecting he'd give us some work—come at last—send some one down."

"Just what I thought; and there's the man," returned Mr. Watchemklose, pointing to the figure of a young man who just then hurried past the window on some errand from the office.

"Yes—he's a clever chap, but a little too soft, eh?" returned the senior partner.

"Not a bit, not a whit, sir," snapped little Mr. Kewter; "the very identical individual, and the sooner he's off the better, Watchemklose."

"Yes, I was thinking so; if anything is to be done, which I doubt, we should not lose an hour."

"Certainly not. You'd better set it going offhand, eh, Sharpe, and let the young gentleman, or, rather, the old one across the water hear in no time that we accept his trust."

So in about four minutes and three-quarters these three busy men of business and astute lawyers had arranged the entire course of action to be followed in a matter which had cost the parties more immediately concerned in it many a weary hour's reflection and days

of cogitation ere they could resolve on the very first initiative step to be taken. The die was cast at last, however, and the thief set to catch the thief.

Before that evening all necessary instructions had been given. What little information could be obtained in London regarding Lee Manor was collected and stowed away in the brains of Mr. Watchemklose's chosen agent, and within a week he himself was on his way to Merestown, with full powers to do all he might find practicable to circumvent, if it were yet possible, the plans of Mr. Stephen Lockstone.

A short letter to Dr. Armsdaile, from the lawyer who had been referred to him by Mr. Charlton as the intimate friend of the family, apprized him of what was to be expected, and so delighted that energetic gentleman, that he instantly flew off to Newman's Buildings, quite regardless of the expectant patients on his round for that morning, dashing into the little parlour of No. 5 so hastily, that he nearly knocked down gentle Mrs. Lee, who was coming out, and sent Mabel into one of the old laughing fits that had used so often to

gladden her mother's heart by their sweet, joyous ring through the old rooms at Lee Manor. The familiar but long unheard tones brought a smile to her lips now, though the tears sprung to her eyes at the same instant, and they were very glistening as she raised them to the doctor's face to reply to his rather incoherent apologies.

"Ha! little lady, you dare laugh at me! Beware! I'll seal up my budget of good news, and only let it out to your mother there, if that's the fashion you treat a hurried, busy man like myself," was his semi-indignant greeting to Mabel, the apology made and accepted.

"Good news!—from Edward?" queried the mother, eagerly.

"Not exactly, my dear madam," returned the Doctor, drily; "American mails do not arrive *every* day just yet; and I fancy you had just received your own despatch when I was here four days ago."

"But it was so short and hurried," pleaded Mabel.

"Nevertheless, I'm afraid the Govern-

ment has not been induced to send out a second special post on that account," returned the gentleman, who was evidently in a very mischievous mood. "Very remiss of them, no doubt, but still true."

"You are as teasing as ever, Dr. Armsdaile," said Mabel, smiling; "and I don't believe you've any good news at all."

"And you are as scheming, Miss Mabel; but you shouldn't get it out of me that way, though you did your new dolls sometimes, you little puss; but that I really can't stay three minutes—ought not to be here now. Why, that famous London firm, those lawyers who have brought such a heap of iniquity to light, you know, is the one your brother is accustomed to communicate with, it appears, madam; they are written to by this last mail, and their agent is to be here before the end of the week. A very well chosen one, too, or I am mistaken," added the Doctor, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Mabel noticed this, but her mother did not. The idea of the London lawyer, of the great step being really taken, made her nervous,

and a thousand doubts and fears about her husband crowded into her mind. Before she could express one, however, the good Doctor had divined her trouble, and laying his hand kindly on her shoulder, said,

"No fear, my dear lady, no fear. That time is past. I mean," he added hastily, lest he might hurt their over-sensitive feelings regarding the cherished invalid, "I mean, now this man has done his worst, it will be rather a relief, than not, to have another to depend on and refer to. A protection, if no good result should follow. Depend on it he will feel it so."

"Do you really think so?" faltered Mrs. Lee, anxiously.

"I am *sure* of it, my dear madam, after, perhaps, just the first shock of having a stranger about; for you know this young man must necessarily be here a good deal. He must pick up as much as he can to be of any real use. Have the *entrée*, in fact. You understand?"

Yes, the flush on Mrs. Lee's face, and the annoyance in her eyes, proved that she did

only too well, without the "*Must* this be?" which she uttered in a low, sad tone.

"Yes, of course, and a very good must, too. If he's the man I rather take him to be, you'll find it a very pleasant intrusion and variety. I believe I know him slightly. His family I knew well, and a very nice, honourable, high-principled race they were. Anyhow, I shall be here to take care no wolf is admitted to our fold; and now I must run away. There's poor old Northcote will be as savage as a wolf, that I'm not there before this, though I can do him little real good. His fit of gout will have its way, and a terribly sharp way that is for him, I'm afraid;" and so saying, the good doctor hurried away, just popping in his head once more to explain, "He may be here directly now—those London fellows don't let the grass grow under their feet, I can tell you—to-day, even."

But it was not to-day that he arrived, no, nor on the morrow, but on the third day, when, having ridden his own horse down, the young man towards mid-day entered Merestown once again, and as he reached the first row of

houses a merry peal of bells greeted his ears. How madly they rang, and well they might. Mr. Geldfinder had secured his prize at last, and it was with no niggard hand he paid the bell-ringers for celebrating the event.

"Married! and to that man! Oh! Hester!" so murmured the horseman as he rode forward into this old familiar town on his new mission to strangers, and was greeted—welcomed, should he call it—by the marriage-bells in honour of his first love's wedding to another. Poor Frank! one little twinge pulled at his heart as the old memories flooded in on it. One, and but a slight one. Let us hope it was the last on that subject felt by Frank Marsden.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE feeble sunlight of a February afternoon was struggling to make its way among the bare branches of the trees, still wet with a morning's heavy rain, and sending watery glances though the large dining-room window of Castle Neville. Furtively kissing now and then the gilt of a picture-frame, then, subsiding immediately, it vanished behind a cloud, as if ashamed of its performance, and left the long, handsome chamber, with its deep velvet paper, in what seemed almost darkness. This room and two or three more formed a modern wing, which had been tacked on to the castle as late as the same century. Indeed, though a fine pile of building seen from a distance among the noble trees of the park, so many had been the additions of various generations of Nevilles to the originally small but strongly-

built tower of Avonsdale, that a nearer approach rather destroyed the effect, as it looked more like a heterogeneous mass of specimens of the architecture of all ages, than an old feudal fortress built before the time of the last Crusade.

However, if modern additions had destroyed the picturesqueness of the edifice, they had greatly enhanced its inward comfort; and nowhere could you meet with a pleasanter abode, take it all in all, than that favourite seat of the Earl of Avonsdale.

Nor was the least amount of comfort to be found in this dining-room, though it did not appear to afford any particular amount of it to the party now lingering there after luncheon. Ennui had taken possession of each of them, for the time, at least. The last remnants of that meal were still on the table, but the governess and two younger daughters of the house had withdrawn, leaving behind the only other one unmarried, Lady Charlotte, some three years Lady Olivia Frazer's junior, and two young men, the second and third sons, besides the Earl and

Countess. The latter was leaning back in a very comfortable leather chair, to which she had removed directly Mademoiselle had left the room with her charges. The Earl was still in his place, intently studying, for the forty-first time, perhaps, the hunting card of his own pack, which he already knew by heart. Lady Charlotte alternately twisted the bracelets on her arms, and pulled the silky ears of a little King Charles which had found its way into her lap. The younger son was whistling a soft accompaniment to an air he was drumming gently on the table-cloth, while the Hon. Henry—the same who had attended at the "Roebuck" in his father's place—stood by the window looking disconsolately out, sometimes giving a melancholy-sounding yawn, sometimes suppressing it, always feeling exceedingly bored at the thought that shooting was over for that season. Presently he exclaimed, with a sudden vivacity that startled his mother,

"By the way, ma'am, I wish you'd call at the Manor, on those new people there."

"On whom, Harry?" asked the Countess,

half raising herself in the chair, and scarcely believing she had heard right.

"On the people at the old Lee Manor, you know—don't you remember them at the ball? A tall, dark girl—you observed to me how handsome she was, and—high authority, you know," he added with a smile—"pronounced her the belle of the evening."

"Very likely, my dear Harry; but because so great a *connoisseur* in female beauty as your cousin Walter, Duke of Grantham, should elect a milkmaid as the Venus of the moment, I don't consider myself bound to call on her."

"But, my dear mother, Miss Lockstone is not a milkmaid, nor in the least that style of thing—and you met her at the county ball, you know."

"Yes; and how she ever came there is a mystery to me. Oh! yes, I know, you persuaded Sir Charles Raymond into giving them tickets; but that they should ever have thought of asking or presuming to go at all! I wonder whom we shall see there next. My sister is quite right in saying these sort of

things are getting to be far too great a mixture."

"Well, really, mother, I do think we might visit the owners of Lee Manor quite as much as the Raymonds themselves even."

"Yes—the Lees, perhaps. I made no objection to them—indeed, I should have been extremely glad of their acquaintance, for the sake of a little more society down here, if they had not been so very peculiar, this generation, poor things; but it is quite different with these people. My lord," she added, appealing to her husband, who looked up, with attention still half-absorbed by the card, "what would you think of my leaving your card at Lee Manor?"

"Well, my dear, if it is necessary, pray do—Bertrand has some, I believe. Eh?—what is it?" as he was fully roused by the general laugh, in which Harry, albeit still bent on gaining his point, could not forbear joining.

"Why, here is Henry proposing I should call on some low people who are living at that

place where poor Mr. Lee was, you know—quite preposterous, isn't it?"

"What, the Merestown attorney, you mean? Lucky dog! I suppose it's all square. Poor Lee was a desperate fellow in his youth; but how such complete ducks and drakes could be made of that fine property in one generation, I can't quite make out."

"How Mr. Lockstone contrived to buy up all the marketable aquatics,—I suppose you mean, sir, and so get the old place into his clutches," suggested the Honourable Fred, suspending his operations on the table-cloth for a minute.

"Well, yes, that is part of what I mean, perhaps, Master Fred, but not all—in these days wise stewards who contrive to succeed imprudent landlords, are not such *rarœ aves* as all that. What is astonishing is, that it's all been done during this poor fellow's occupation, and yet he was not so young when the old man died. My dear, you must remember about it?" pursued the old earl, warming to the subject as memories of his youthful days, in many of whose exploits the poor imbecile of

No. 5, Newman's Buildings, then the young heir of Lee Manor, and not many years Lord Neville's senior, had been a sharer, most probably the suggester.

"I don't know," responded the Countess, more coldly; "till Olivia dragged me to see these people—not very long ago, I think it was—all I ever knew, all I had ever heard of the Lees, were some old stories of yours, not telling very reputably, I fancied, for this Mr. Lee."

"Or for your humble servant either, eh, Sophia?" and with a good-humoured smile the earl discarded his hunting-card, and went to his wife, taking up that very popular position on the hearth-rug—in front both of the fire and his lady, which, however comforting to the gentleman concerned, is by no means a picturesque or gratifying one to the beholders. "Ah! well, he was a sad dog, poor Ned Lee, and I suppose that's one reason why we respectable fathers of families cut his acquaintance when he came back to live in his own hall, married to no one knew whom."

"But about the Lockstones, mother?" per-

sisted Harry Neville, who, by no means abundantly interested in his father's reminiscences, was particularly so in the question of the call.

"Why, what on earth can you want your mother to call on an attorney's wife for?" exclaimed Lord Avonsdale, now quite roused to all the enormity of the proposal in debate.

"Yes, was there ever anything so utterly absurd?" echoed the Countess, quite satisfied now that her lord had fairly entered on the discussion.

"I am not wishing anyone to call on the *attorney*—I simply suggest the expediency of leaving a card on the owner of Lee Manor. I take it the attorneyship will be dropped with all convenient speed; and if I am not misinformed, I think you, my lord, were the authority, the rent-roll of Lee Manor is, for a commoner, no small inheritance."

"Inheritance! not much of that here, Master Harry! But what can it concern you?"

"Oh! nothing very spècial, only you know Fred and I got shooting cards—and it was the very best day we've had this season."

"And the season is now over," observed the

Earl, drily, as he still looked to his son for an explanation.

"Is Harry thinking of the bright eyes of the pheasants, or of those of this miraculous beauty, I wonder?" asked Lady Charlotte with great apparent carelessness, but a mischievous twinkle in her own bright eyes, which showed she had been an attentive though hitherto silent listener to the conversation.

"Nonsense, Charlie!" was her brother's rather hotly-uttered rejoinder, but a faint flush spread over his face, notwithstanding. Harry Neville's was a frank, open nature, and hitherto unspoiled by his association with the great world, though he numbered already some six or seven-and-twenty summers. Genial and trusting was he, and gifted by nature with many of those distinctive features of that charity which many an earnest but harder character finds so very difficult of attainment.

"Ah! Hotspur Harry, you are evidently *épris* to desperation, by one or other," returned his sister, gravely, shaking her glossy curls—the *new* fashion in those days, and the

Honourable Fred laughed aloud as he suggested,

"Of course he is—by those of the unfeathered biped, too, I feel positive; and it was that which made him speak of inheritance so inapplicably just now. He has a misty notion, to be sure, it may fall to his share; charged with the maintenence, tender care, and cherishing, &c., &c., of bright eyes, of course, but that, nevertheless, it might prove no despicable portion for an earl's second son —even so burdened."

"Really, Henry! I do hope you are not so thoroughly ridiculous," cried the Countess, gravely, sitting upright in her chair as she spoke, the better to take the critical survey she now bestowed upon him.

There was no doubt, Harry did blush now, and his mother saw it, though he turned rapidly to the window, and exclaimed half angrily,

"Upon my word, ma'am, I don't see why you should listen to all these absurd suggestions. And I cannot myself understand why there must be some mysterious motive at work

for me to propose your doing what half the county have probably done already, or will do, before six months are over."

"Gently, Sir Harry," said his father, who had been silently watching the young man during the last few sentences. "If half the county *had* done it, that might make a difference; but the *will* do so, is quite a different matter, and I shrewdly suspect, whatever example Castle Neville sets regarding this will be followed."

"Of course," chimed in Lady Avonsdale; "and that makes it more incumbent on us not to do anything of the sort. The way in which people push themselves forward now is becoming quite unbearable. I am sure when I was a girl these *parvenus* knew their place and kept it. Indeed, I don't believe there were any then. It is quite a new set."

"Not exactly, my dear," returned her lord, smiling, "I'm not quite sure about your sister's husband ever having had a grandfather, remember—and we have an acquaintance or two ourselves in London whose pedigrees don't quite date from the Conquest, I fancy. Still,

this Lee Manor business is a different thing. The man starts up under one's very nose, from a pettifogging attorney into the occupier of one of the best estates in the county. I don't say, we may not call some time or other; but I don't see any immediate hurry merely because the man has a handsome daughter."

"Can't you have another flirtation with her by calling yourself in acknowledgment of your day's shooting, Hal," asked Lady Charlotte consolingly.

"Yes—no doubt—and I should be told Mr. Lockstone was out, and see just as much of her as we did on the shooting-day."

"Why, you said what a first-rate spread was given you for lunch, and that you both chose to go in for it purposely."

"And might just as well—better perhaps—have let it alone; we saw no soul but an old butler, almost as stiff as our own, and he only appeared twice, leaving all attendance to his subordinates; and I assure you, my lady mother, whatever you may think, the ladies have no idea of pushing themselves, or even being seen too often by ordinary eyes, for I

ventured some sort of remark as to the family not lunching with the shooting-party, and old Wellcome himself in past days could scarcely have equalled the grandeur of the reply I received—given, too, with that half respectful, half surprised look I've seen on his face, when speaking to some one of my brother's rather questionable cronies."

"What did he say?" asked the Countess, a little interested in spite of herself, and not the least affected by the allusion to Lord Neville's *set*. The time for that had passed. When first the heir of Avonsdale had affected peculiar tastes, pursued scientific researches, and brought some of the "queer creatures" he chose to associate with down to his paternal mansion, it had been a great trouble to his lady mother, who would greatly have preferred his sowing wild oats of a more legitimate, if possibly less innoxious sort, during that period of life which it appears young men of fortune and position make the sowing season of some moral or mental crop of the sort.

Lord Neville took to a very harmless species of agriculture, and after a time even his

mother recovered the shock of its peculiarity, contenting herself with the hope that his desire for the occupation would pass away as years advanced, and that when the period for taking a future Countess arrived he might settle all the more advantageously for not having followed the more beaten road to that consummation. So Lady Avonsdale let Harry's little irate fling pass, and only asked what the man said.

"Why, that the ladies did sometimes lunch with personal *friends* of the family when shooting there—not with the general parties ever! And the air and the emphasis with which the speech was made!"

"Yes," added Fred, "it was more than all I could do to keep my countenance. If the lawyer's pretty daughters had been princesses of the best blood royal their dignity could not have been more carefully shielded. Why, Charlie, even you have deigned to lunch on occasions with greater plebeians than an Earl's second and third sons.

"I don't think it was a bad line for them to take, though," observed his mother, mus-

ingly. "Intensely absurd in their position, of course, but still about the best thing they could do. By-the-way, Harry, I can't think what you see in that dark, flashing girl; she looks like a modern 'Lady Macbeth' to my fancy. Now the other creature was a fair, pretty, even refined-looking person—for her, I mean—only, if I remember right, she had always a dreadful man hovering about her—a fearfully vulgar specimen of that sort of people."

"Yes, in this case the ladies are more presentable than the men, for a wonder," remarked the Honourable Fred. "Come, Char, and have a game at billiards before riding," and Lady Charlotte consenting, brother and sister left the room together, and Harry was lingeringly following, when Lady Avonsdale detained him by asking,

"Why can't you flirt with that one, if you must with either, Harry?"

"I'm not very likely to have the opportunity, my dear mother, as you are so determined not to call; but I could scarcely pay my *devoirs* to much advantage in that quarter

if you did. Miss Lockstone married that same attractive gentleman you seem to have honoured with so much notice last week."

"Really! What a horrible idea!" and the Countess resumed her lounging position, the better to contemplate it, apparently.

"He receives a very large dowry with his bride, because the estate is destined, it is said, for the younger daughter's portion, as I understand," said the young man, with great apparent carelessness, and then he too went off to the billiard-room, leaving the Earl and Countess to a conjugal *tête-à-tête*.

"Not so bad a Parthian shot of policy that," remarked the former, laughing, as the door closed, "especially for Harry. I am not sure but he might make a diplomatist yet, eh, Lady Avonsdale?"

"I'm afraid not; and as to this, I am still more afraid he is really very much in earnest. What is to be done?" and the poor lady looked up at her lord in dismay.

"Nothing—not as to him, at least. As to calling on these people, should you dislike it very much, Sophia?"

"Why, you could not think of such a match for Harry?" and the Countess literally started up from her chair.

"That is as it may be. Young men don't marry the first pretty girl they fall in love with; but no good results can follow determined opposition with such a character as Harry's, depend on it; and, to say the truth, if this man has honestly earned Lee Manor, it is no despicable property for any man, peer or not. I never heard anything against the father as a lawyer, though he's not much liked, I believe, and his father was a very respectable person. The girl had a grandfather, such as he was, and really Harry might do worse. He has five brothers, remember."

Lady Avonsdale did remember it, that large dowers had been given already to three daughters, and that three to be portioned in some way still remained; but Harry was the second of her six boys.

"If Neville should not marry—he is between thirty and forty now," she hesitated.

"So much the better, Sophy; he'll marry all in good time. No need for all the Avons-

dales to follow our example, my dear, and see their heir born before they are five-and-twenty. It would be no joke for every generation of our family to have a dozen sons and daughters," and the Earl put his arm round his comely wife's waist and smiled with very genial content at his fate—the twelve sturdy pulls at his rent-roll notwithstanding.

"Well, but, Henry, this lawyer. Fancy such a connection with a man living close to us; if he had come here, or belonged to some other place, it might do, but really," and she shook her head doubtingly.

"My dear, Merestown isn't all the world, though some of the good people round seem inclined to consider it so. Harry's wife would become the Honourable Mrs. Neville, and it would cease to matter who she was when once they were at the Manor; for I daresay if such a thing ever did happen, one could arrange matters with the old lawyer. But, after all, it is very premature to calculate arrangements on a chance that may never happen. Only I do think, if what Harry says is true—and I will inquire into that to-day—

there would be no harm in calling. We can see our way better then; and if you do it now, and it does not answer, why we shall soon be going to town, you know, and it is easy to let the thing drop when we return."

"Very well," was Lady Avonsdale's reply.

She did not altogether agree with her lord, except on the one point—of the ease of dropping the acquaintance. That she not only could, but quietly resolved she would do with all convenient speed, unless very strong reasons should present themselves against such a step. She would much rather not have sought any knowledge of such people at all; but since husband and son both advocated the course, she would do it with the best grace she might, and once done, take her own line afterwards.

Harry's information turned out to be perfectly accurate. Indeed, he had been at some pains to obtain it; so the Avonsdale carriage passed through the gates of the Manor once more, and the Countess went in state to pay her visit to the attorney's transplanted wife. She went alone, however. Lady Charlotte need not go, and Lady Charlotte should not—

on that her lady mother was perfectly determined. But Lady Avonsdale was not admitted. The same important gentleman who had so amused her sons, presented himself, after a short parley between the respective footmen, and advancing to the carriage door, informed her ladyship, with deferential politeness, that he was "extremely sorry, as would be his mistress, but Mrs. Lockstone was unfortunately too indisposed to see visitors today. He regretted it greatly—but so it was," and he received the cards as though it was something of a condescension for him to take them, bowed low, and closed the door almost before the carriage was in motion.

Lady Avonsdale was a little nettled. She only half-believed in the indisposition, and began to think herself disappointed and balked. She had had a slight curiosity to reconnoitre the manners and customs of "such people" in their own home, and now she fancied she had been very anxious to see them, and felt herself proportionably aggrieved.

What would her feelings have been could she have seen the handsome face of Sarah

Lockstone herself watching the carriage as it drove off, her very bitterest smile upon her rich, well-formed lips, and an expression of mingled satisfaction and contempt in her dark eyes.

She followed the progress of the coroneted vehicle till it was lost among the trees in the sweep of the Park, and then turned her head back again into the room, the drawing-room where, by a singular chance, she was sitting with her mother when the Countess drove up. She had witnessed the approach as well as the departure, quite hidden herself in the deep embrasure of the window.

"I hope you are grateful to me, mama, for saving you the novelty of entertaining a countess," she observed, half-interrogatively, after looking at her mother for a moment in silence.

Poor Mrs. Lockstone sat bolt upright in one of the many easy chairs surrounding her, mechanically busy over a bit of knitting she held in her hands. Her thoughts were not on that, however, though to which painful me-

 they were now specially wandering, she

would herself have been puzzled to tell, probably.

Starting as Sarah spoke, she looked up at first blankly, then with some uneasiness said,

"Yes, Sarah. I did not wish to see her ladyship, I am sure; only—do you think—I wonder what your father would have wished us to do."

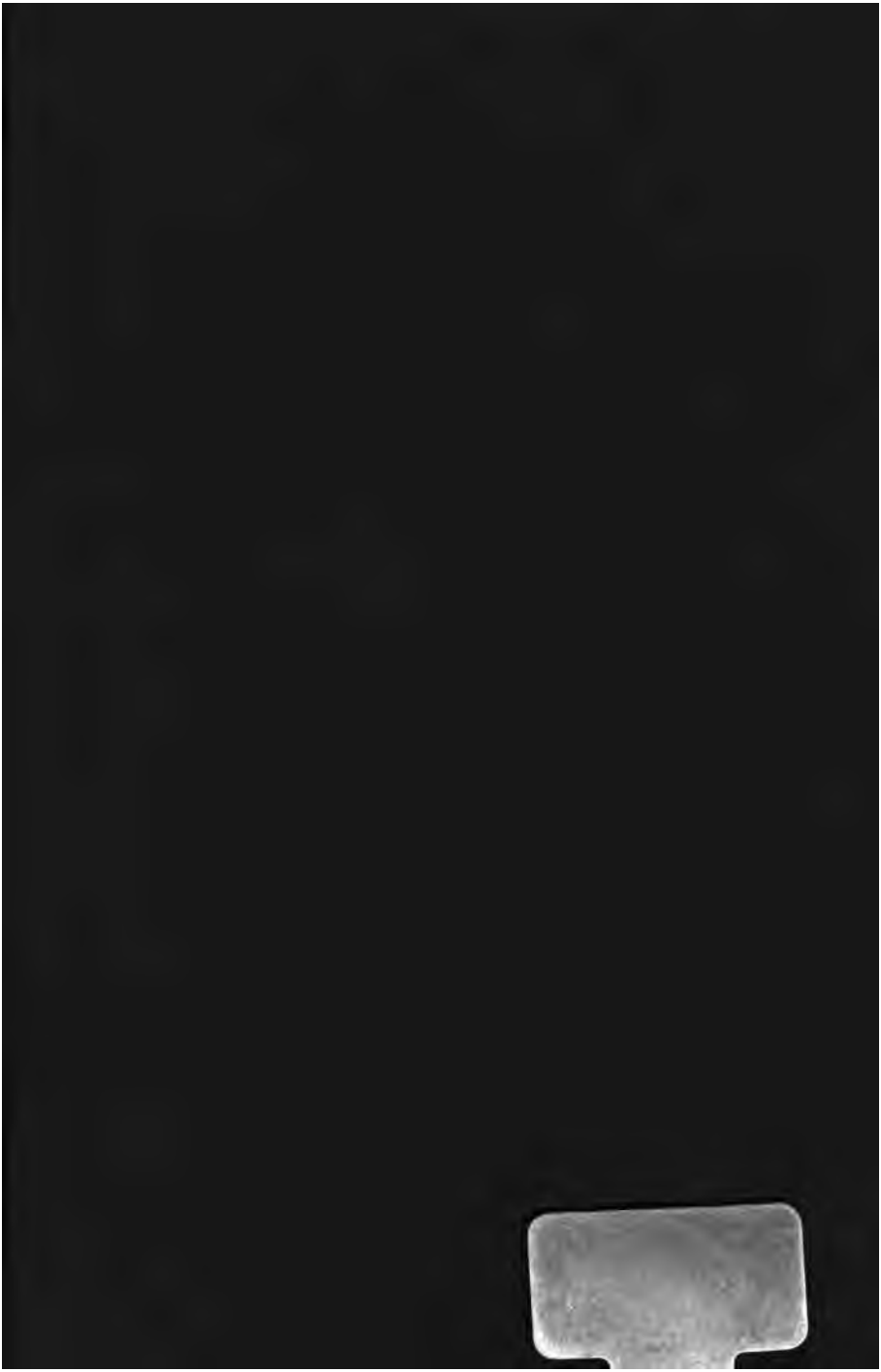
"I really can't say. If his wishes are as inconsistent as his conduct of late, I should imagine he would hardly know himself."

"Oh! Sarah, I hope he won't be vexed with me," and the poor helpless woman said the words so piteously, with such genuine dread, that her daughter could find no pleasure in keeping her on the rack.

"Really, mama, I don't suppose he cares very much either way; and, at any rate, the responsibility rests with *me*."

Very coldly the words were spoken, but they were received with abundant gratitude, for if Mrs. Lockstone had any real feeling left alive within her, it was the dread of her husband's displeasure.

There was no mixture of contradictory sentiments, no mingling of motives to dissect and analyze, no flimsy veil of hypocrisy or affectation worth drawing aside, and affording amusement and interest in the process, and Sarah almost sighed as she thought of this, and of all Mrs. Geldfinder would have said and felt on a similar occasion.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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